

ELLORA'S CAVE PRESENTS

Odd Man
Out

CLAIRE
THOMPSON

An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



www.ellorascave.com

Odd Man Out

ISBN 9781419912818

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.

Odd Man Out Copyright © 2007 Claire Thompson

Edited by Mary Moran.

Photography and cover art by Les Byerley.

Electronic book Publication November 2007

This book may not be reproduced or used in whole or in part by any means existing without written permission from the publisher, Ellora's Cave Publishing, Inc.® 1056 Home Avenue, Akron OH 44310-3502.

This book is a work of fiction and any resemblance to persons, living or dead, or places, events or locales is purely coincidental. The characters are productions of the authors' imagination and used fictitiously.

ODD MAN OUT

Claire Thompson

Trademarks Acknowledgement

The author acknowledges the trademarked status and trademark owners of the following wordmarks mentioned in this work of fiction:

Blue Curacao: Hiram Walker & Sons, Inc.

Dr. Pepper: Dr. Pepper Company

GQ: Advance Magazine Publishers Inc.

Hunter College: Hunter College of The City University of New York

Instant Messenger: Kaye, Shawn S. Individual

New York University: New York University Corporation

Wharton School of Business: Trustees of the University of Pennsylvania

Chapter One

Sunlight streaming through the stained glass cast a golden light across the planes and angles of the man's classically handsome face. His rich, chestnut brown hair was brushed back from a high, noble forehead. He stood with casual elegance in his beautifully tailored dove gray suit, inadvertently upstaging the somewhat nervous-looking groom beside him.

I wonder if he's gay, Ben thought.

"George looks like he'd rather be anywhere but up there waiting for Jeanette," Carl whispered, leaning close. "Not that I blame him. Jeanette can be a real bitch." Jeanette was Carl's sister and the only reason the two of them were about to sit through a long, boring wedding ceremony. Ben didn't respond.

He had mixed feelings about attending the wedding with Carl. Could ex-lovers ever really be "just friends"? It had only been a few weeks since the breakup after six months of a roller-coaster relationship. Toward the end Carl's temper, especially when he'd had a drink or three, seemed to flare at the slightest thing. The smoldering intensity Ben at first found sexy and attractive in a "bad boy" sort of way had come to seem controlling and at times even abusive.

Though he'd never actually hit Ben, more than once during an argument he'd pushed him against a wall or gripped his arm too hard, a bruise sometimes flowering later in the shape of his strong fingers. Ben realized he'd begun to be afraid of his lover. The thought was disconcerting to say the least.

Wednesdays were Ben's poker night and had been since before he'd hooked up with Carl. Though he'd tolerated it at first, Carl didn't like it that Ben went somewhere without him every Wednesday. He accused Ben of having an affair with one of the players, a man who was in fact straight, though Carl refused to believe this. When in his rage, Carl had smashed his fist through a wall, Ben left, this time for good.

They didn't speak for over a week, though Carl had left messages daily on his cell and office phones, endlessly apologizing and professing his love. One afternoon Ben found Carl camped on his stoop in front of his SoHo apartment house. He looked so contrite and forlorn Ben relented and allowed him to come inside. After six months together, he realized it wasn't fair not to at least talk things through.

Carl begged for another chance but Ben knew it wouldn't happen. It wasn't only Carl's tendency toward violence. He'd realized once he was no longer seeing Carl on a daily basis just how much under Carl's influence he had come—feeling compelled to always explain where he was going and where he had been, walking on eggshells in an effort not to upset Carl or give him cause to feel jealous. The week without him had seemed like a release from prison, even if the jailer had been sexy and claimed to love

him. He knew he wasn't willing to step back into that relationship. He should have ended it months sooner.

Carl had seemed to capitulate, agreeing to remain friends. A few more weeks passed, during which Ben realized with relief Carl was ready to move on with a life that didn't include him. Or so he had thought.

Thus when Carl called, reminding Ben he'd agreed several months prior to attend his sister's wedding, Ben had, perhaps against his better instincts, agreed. "Just do this one thing for me, won't you? You know I hate to go to weddings alone," Carl said, his voice coaxing. Ben gave in, thinking perhaps this gesture of friendship would mollify him. He figured at least at a wedding they wouldn't get into a fight. He'd figured wrong.

It was while Carl was off with the family getting pictures taken for the wedding album that Ben saw him again. The reception was in full swing, voices rising over the live band as the champagne and liquor flowed. The man was leaning against a wall, one foot up against it, a fluted glass his hand.

Ben began to move toward him without consciously deciding to do so. His mouth felt dry and he took a sip from his glass, feeling almost dizzy, though not from liquor. As if on cue, the man turned to stare at him, watching his progress as he made his way through the crowd of revelers.

"Hi," Ben said, once he was close enough to see the man's dark blue eyes.

"Hello," the man answered, smiling. "I don't believe we've met?" He extended his hand.

Ben shook it, feeling a jolt of excitement as skin met skin. "I'm a friend of the bride's. My name is Ben. Ben Richman."

"I'm David Anderson." The man's grip was firm and confident. Ben found he didn't want to let go. Something in the way David looked deep into his eyes, a slow, sexy smile spreading over his face, made Ben almost certain he was gay. His next two sentences removed all doubt. "I saw you watching me from the pews. I hoped you liked what you saw."

Ben's heart caught in his throat. He felt his cheeks warm. He hadn't realized he'd been that obvious. Ben could feel the sexual tension rising between them. He smiled back. "Yes, I did. Very much."

David shifted, taking his foot down from the wall. It was the most casual of motions but it somehow closed the space between them, heightening the sense of intimacy in a way that made Ben's pulse race. For a crazy moment he imagined David was going to lean over and kiss him.

Instead he said, "Want to get something to eat? That buffet looks great. I was waiting until the crowds died down."

Once they'd made their way around the food table, the two men found seats at one of the long tables already mostly occupied. Ben knew he should save a seat for Carl. "So," David said, as if reading his mind. "I take it you're with the guy you were sitting next to? Jeanette's brother, if I'm not mistaken."

"Yes. That's Carl. You know him?" An irrational jealousy flared through Ben at the thought of Carl and David together.

"I think I met him once at a barbeque George had. I never really got to know him though. I didn't even know he was gay."

Ben relaxed and admitted, "We used to go out. We just recently broke up, but I'm not sure he really believes it yet." He grinned ruefully.

"Uh-oh," David said. "Are you planning on letting him know?"

Ben laughed. "Yeah. I've told him but he doesn't seem to hear it. He claims I don't know what I want. That I'm just confused or upset or whatever he comes up with at the moment. He's a very compelling sort of person. He's used to getting what he wants, I guess you'd say."

"He's super good-looking. I can see why you might have a hard time letting go," David offered.

Ben nodded. "No argument there." He laughed without mirth. "Things were good at first but he was just too..." Ben had been about to say Carl was too possessive, too controlling, too intense, but he was suddenly embarrassed to admit he'd dated a guy who was like that. Instead he said, "Serious. He wanted us to live together. I'm not ready for that."

David nodded, watching Ben over the rim of his glass as he drank. Ben couldn't help but admire his strong, sexy throat. He imagined leaning over to kiss it, to lick down the curve of his neck to his collarbone, hidden now beneath snowy-white linen.

He wished Carl would somehow evaporate, leaving him free to focus on the sexy man across from him. Instead, David said lightly, "Speak of the devil. Here comes Carl now."

Ben twisted in his seat in time to see Carl moving toward them. When he reached the table, he put a heavy hand on Ben's shoulder. "You didn't save me a seat?" His voice was soft, his fingers digging into Ben's shoulder.

"Sorry," Ben said, pulling himself away from Carl's grip with a shrug. "I didn't know when you'd be done."

David stood. "Carl, is it? I believe we met once at George's." Carl nodded stiffly, barely taking his eyes from Ben. David waved a hand toward his chair. "Please, take my seat. I think I'm supposed to go pose now with the groom." He glanced at his watch and gave Ben a long, lingering look. "It was nice to meet you. Let's connect sometime later." Ben watched David walk away, wondering if he really had to go for photographs or just decided to make a graceful getaway.

Carl slid into David's now-vacant seat. "I leave you for five minutes and already you've picked up some guy?"

"Stop it, Carl. You know it's not like that."

"Oh, isn't it? I saw you drooling over him during the ceremony. You're supposed to be here with *me*."

"As friends. Remember?"

"Right," Carl said bitterly. "As *friends*, so you can pick up the first available guy you see now that you're free of me." He set the full tumbler of whiskey down rather too hard against the table.

"Don't do this, Carl. You promised."

Carl suddenly looked deflated. "Yeah, I know. I'm sorry. I can't help it. I still love you so fucking much." His voice cracked and he took a healthy swig of his drink. Ben doubted it was his first nor that it would be his last. Why had he agreed to come with him to this thing? He knew now it had been a mistake. They couldn't be just friends. Not while Carl still claimed to love him.

Ben glanced around the large ballroom. Couples were swaying on the dance floor. David Anderson was nowhere in sight. He'd said to "connect" later. Did that mean he was interested? The look they'd shared had been electric, but maybe David just did that out of habit with any new gay guy he met. Ben hadn't had a chance to find out anything about him. Was he involved with someone? Did he even live locally?

Carl put his hand over Ben's. He used to thrill to Carl's touch but now he felt nothing. "This is nice, huh?" Carl said softly, his words slightly slurred. Ben saw the glass was empty. "We used to have so much fun, didn't we? When did it stop being fun, huh? When did you stop having fun with your Carl?"

Gently Ben pulled his hand from beneath Carl's. "How about we get you something to eat? You'll feel better with something in your stomach."

"What?" Carl stared at him, dark eyes flashing. "I'm asking you why you had to break my heart and you want me to fucking *eat* something?" Carl's voice rose, his face turning red. Ben blew out a breath, embarrassed as the couple sitting next to them turned to stare.

"Carl, you've had too much to drink —"

Carl cut him off. "No, I haven't had *enough*! That's the problem. I haven't had enough yet to numb myself to the fact you've not only dumped me, but now I have to watch you drooling over that piece of ass. Which is all he is, by the way. He models clothing for a *living*! I don't think he even went to college!"

Carl, armed with an MBA from the Wharton School of Business, was something of an education snob. Ben, with a bachelor's degree in economics from NYU, had been impressed by his credentials when they'd first met on Wall Street where they both worked. "Lower your voice," he said, trying to keep calm.

"Why?" Carl snapped. "Are you embarrassed to be seen with me now? Is that it?" Ben realized Carl was even drunker than he'd thought. "You used to hang on my every word! You didn't used to be able to get enough of me! You couldn't even wait to get home – you'd try to blow me in the car!"

Ben stood abruptly, his face burning with embarrassment. Several people around them were now openly staring, their expressions scandalized. Ben pressed his lips together to keep from engaging on Carl's level. In a quiet voice that belied his anger, he said, "I won't do this with you anymore, Carl. I'm leaving. Goodbye."

He strode away, moving toward the doors where Carl had gone for the photo shoot. He would find Jeanette, apologize for leaving early and wish her and George the best. He closed the doors behind him, half expecting Carl to come bursting through, demanding what the hell he thought he was doing. Thankfully that didn't happen. Ben leaned against the door for a moment, listening to the music and sounds of laughter on the other side.

He looked down the hallway, spying an open door, the interior of the room brightly lit. Sticking his head around the door, he saw he'd found the wedding party still posing for pictures. He stepped just inside, not wanting to interfere with the camera. Jeanette stood in the middle of the room, surrounded by three little girls holding small bouquets. She saw him and waved.

"Hello there, Ben! We'll be done in a minute. George keeps telling me I'm missing my own reception, but how often you do get a chance for a good wedding album? I plan to make the most of it!" She drained a glass of champagne and laughed.

Ben allowed himself to be hugged. He had never seen Carl's younger sister so bubbly, but then it wasn't every day one got married. Ben had only met Jeanette a few times. Carl told him she vaguely disapproved of her brother being gay, though she had always been nice to Ben. "Excuse me for barging in. You look beautiful," he offered. As Jeanette beamed, he added, "Something's come up and I have to leave early. I wanted to congratulate you and George before I left."

"Thanks, Ben. I'm sorry you have to go. Is Carl going too?"

"No. He's staying, I think." *I hope*, he thought. Jeanette furrowed her brows but didn't comment further. She was distracted by the long-suffering photographer who no doubt wanted to wrap up the shoot and get out of there.

Ben slipped out of the room and nearly collided with someone heading toward him. He stepped back, automatically saying, "Excuse me," before he realized who it was.

"We meet again." David Anderson smiled, white teeth flashing against lightly tanned skin. "I didn't realize you were back here. I think I left my keys in there." He pointed toward the ajar door where the photo shoot still continued.

"I was just leaving actually," Ben replied.

"Leaving? The party's just getting started."

"Yeah, well. It was a mistake to come with Carl. He's had too much to drink and I really don't feel like dealing with him right now. It's better I make an early night of it. I just came back to congratulate the bride."

"You have a car?" David asked.

"No. Carl drove. I'll get a cab. I don't live that far from here. No big deal."

"Wait right here. I'll get my keys and give you a lift. It's really no trouble."

"I couldn't ask you to do that. You're the best man. They're going to be demanding a toast from you and all that stuff they do at weddings, aren't they?"

"Don't worry about it. I'll let George know I have to run out and I'll be back later. By the time I get back, if I know George, and I do, he'll be so drunk he won't even remember I left."

As David maneuvered through the crowded city streets, Ben had a chance to study his profile. It wasn't hard to believe he was a model with his chiseled good looks and broad shoulders. He'd hung his tuxedo jacket in the back of the car, giving Ben a better view of his physique. His cock stirred as David turned toward him briefly and smiled.

"It was really nice of you to take me home," Ben said. "It's quite an imposition."

"Not at all," David assured him. "It was my pleasure. I'm sorry you were having such a rotten time. I don't really know Carl, but it sounds like he's not handling things too well."

"It was my fault, I suppose. I do know Carl, and I should have known better. I should have listened to my gut. Carl isn't the kind of guy you can let down gently. It's got to be a clean break." He stared out the window at the bright lights. "I felt kind of guilty, I guess. We were together for six months. It's funny too, because at first I was the intense one. I mean, I was the one more into him than he was into me. He's so good-looking and I'm just Joe Average. He's got this MBA and is an investment banker. He probably earns five times what I do."

"I'd hardly call you Joe Average," David laughed, dropping his hand lightly to Ben's knee for a moment before returning it to the steering wheel. "You're a very good-looking man."

Ben stared at David's hand lightly gripping the wheel, still feeling the touch of his fingers on his leg. Ignoring his rising cock he said, "Thanks, but compared to you and Carl, I'm certainly nothing to write home about."

"Matter of opinion," David said. "And as far as money goes, who cares? As long as you've got enough to keep a roof over your head and clothes on your back, what's the big deal?"

"Well, in Manhattan that's a pretty tall order in itself!" Ben answered.

"True. I could never afford to live here. I live in Queens."

"Carl mentioned you were a model?"

David pursed his lips. "That's how I make my living. I prefer to think of myself as an actor." He grinned and shook his head. "I've done a bunch of commercials. They pay pretty well. I model for various catalog companies and the occasional magazine spread. My passion though, is the theater. I've been in a number of off-Broadway plays, one of them as the lead. I get pretty regular acting work but it's definitely not enough to pay the bills on its own."

"That's impressive. I admire anyone who can get up on a stage and perform. Are you in anything right now?"

"Yeah, actually. I just got a part in a new play by Janis Elderkin. Have you heard of her? British, quite famous in Europe. I auditioned without a lot of expectation. I was thrilled when I heard I got the part." They chatted a while about the play, David clearly delighted at the interest Ben was taking.

Eventually he asked, "So what do you do?"

"Nothing as glamorous as modeling and acting. I'm a research analyst for an investment banking firm on Wall Street."

"Ah. The same one Carl works for?"

"No. Though our offices are in the same building. That's how we met. We both attended a seminar on investment strategy that was given by his firm."

There was actually a parking spot not too far from Ben's apartment house. David pulled neatly into it. "I really enjoyed meeting you," he said, turning toward Ben.

"Me too. Thank you so much for the ride. I hope I can see you again?" He held his breath as he waited for David's response.

"I would like that too," David said. "Very much. I wish I didn't have to go back to this thing but..."

"No, of course you do. You've got that toast to make to the happy couple, don't forget." Ben grinned.

David sighed. "Yeah, I suppose you're right." He reached back into his suit jacket and pulled out a card. "My number's on here. Call me." As he handed the card to Ben, their fingers touched. Ben swallowed hard, resisting the urge to grab David's face and pull it toward his own. They stared at one another for a long moment.

"I want to kiss you," David whispered. He raised his hand to Ben's cheek, lightly caressing it. Ben felt his heart begin to pound as the devastatingly handsome man leaned toward him. As their lips met, Ben closed his eyes, holding his breath.

David kissed him lightly, pressing warm lips against his as he brought his hands again to Ben's face, pulling him closer. His tongue probed and Ben parted his lips, eager for his kiss. He felt his cock rising hard against his belly. Impulsively he clutched David's shoulders, gripping the firm swell of muscle beneath the fabric of his shirt. David moaned softly against his mouth. He felt David's hand drop to his crotch, cupping his erection. Jolts of pleasure hurtled through Ben's body.

"I could come up to your place," David murmured, his fingers stroking Ben through his pants. "They wouldn't miss me."

Ben pulled back, trying to catch his breath. "No, no. You need to go back. I couldn't vouch for my behavior if you came inside. You're driving me crazy as it is."

David grinned widely. "That's the intention."

Ben shook his head. Though they'd only just met, somehow he sensed there was going to be something between them—something special. He wanted it to be real, not just lust playing itself out in a one-night stand. "No. It wouldn't be right. Forgive me for sounding corny, but we've only just met. And you do have a wedding reception to get back to." He reached for the door handle and opened it. Patting his suit jacket where he'd slipped David's card he said, "I'll call you. Thank you so much for the ride." Softly he added, "By the way, the kiss. It was amazing."

David nodded, grinning good-naturedly. "Okay then. We'll take it slow. You have a good evening." Ben watched as he pulled away from the curb, giving a small wave as he entered the ceaseless stream of traffic.

"Why did I do that?" Ben wondered aloud. "I just sent away the sexiest man I think I've ever met. I must be getting old." Shaking his head with a wry grin, he used his key to enter his building and disappeared inside.

* * * * *

Carl's fingers were clenched on the steering wheel, his knuckles white. From his vantage point several parking spots back along Ben's street, he could only just see the two heads as they leaned toward one another. Anger washed over him as he watched what he knew must be a kiss. He'd managed to catch Ben getting into David's old clunker of a car in front of the reception hall. The car had disappeared into traffic before the valet finally retrieved Carl's sleek sports car.

Not knowing what else to do, he'd driven to Ben's place. He knew he was speeding but the whiskey in his veins and the jealousy in his heart made him reckless. Realizing he'd beat them there, he worried they would go directly to David's place, wherever that might be, but within a few minutes David's car had pulled up. He watched, waiting for them to get out, though he had no clear idea of what he planned to do about it.

"How could you do this to me?" he said aloud, banging the steering wheel for emphasis. Ben, *his* Ben, the man of his dreams, had broken his heart! Half a year of his life devoted to a guy who casually dumped him for some brainless stud. He'd showered Ben with gifts and love and this was how he repaid him?

It had honestly never occurred to him Ben would be the one to leave. Carl knew he was better-looking and he was certainly richer. He even had a bigger cock! Ben used to dote on his every word, always ready for him in bed, always hard for him. When had the change occurred? Didn't Ben appreciate Carl was the best thing ever to happen to him?

Sure, Ben was attractive in a craggy kind of way with his crooked nose from a hockey injury and his unruly blond hair curling down the back of his neck and always falling into his eyes. Carl used to advise him he needed a cleaner-cut look if he wanted to make it out of the research department and into the hallowed halls of banking and deal-making where the real money was made. Ben would just laugh and say he liked research and he liked his hair long. He was tall and lean where Carl was more heavily muscled. He preferred to jog around the park or play a game of basketball than to work out with weights, which Carl did religiously.

His attention was refocused as he saw Ben getting out of the car. He clenched the wheel again, waiting for that asshole Anderson to emerge, no doubt intent on getting Ben into bed, the bastard. David Anderson's brand of handsome was too GQ for Carl's tastes. His lustrous brown hair, the rich, reddish highlights no doubt from a bottle, the square chiseled jaw and intense blue-eyed stare might look good in a magazine spread but held little attraction for Carl. Though he wasn't consciously aware of it, Carl never chose to be with men better-looking than himself. He preferred to be the one adored, not the adorer.

Ben was out of his mind to break up with him! He might get David into bed for a quick fuck, but a guy like that would never keep Ben hanging around. Guys like that were empty-headed morons just out for a good time. He would use Ben and toss him aside.

He watched as David's car pulled slowly out into traffic. Already the guy had refused Ben's overtures. Good. Maybe now Ben would come to his senses. Carl would apologize for blowing up at the reception. Ben had been right—he'd had too much to drink. Though now, he thought, he could use another. Using all his self-control, he didn't leap out of his car to run after Ben. He'd bide his time. He'd win him back. One way or the other, Ben would belong to him again.

Chapter Two

Ben sat in the back row of the empty theater. He'd arranged with David to meet him the following Thursday after work outside the small theater in Greenwich Village where he had a rehearsal. He expected to be done by seven o'clock, he'd told Ben, but when seven had come and gone, Ben had decided to do a little exploring.

Entering the unlocked side door of the theater, he'd seen a small group of people on the raised stage. One of them was David. As Ben slipped unobtrusively into a seat at the back, he smiled indulgently, assuming the dedicated actors had lost track of time. He watched them reading their lines, distracted from the words by David's strong, sexy body, now clothed in a black T-shirt and faded jeans. He looked younger than he had in his tuxedo. His hair, slicked back for the wedding, was falling into his eyes as he read aloud from the script in his hand.

After a few minutes a woman clapped her hands and said, "That's it for tonight, guys. Excellent reading. We'll start blocking the scenes tomorrow." David glanced at his watch and frowned, no doubt realizing he was late. Giving the woman and the other actor with whom he'd been reading quick pecks on the cheek, hurriedly he grabbed his things and jumped down from the stage. He was heading toward the side door Ben had entered. Ben stood and called out, "Hi there."

David swiveled toward him with an apologetic smile. "Hey. I'm sorry I kept you waiting. I lost track of time. I didn't realize we'd gone over."

"No problem. I'm not on a schedule. I enjoyed watching you up there. It was interesting."

"Yeah, this is going to be a great production," David said enthusiastically. "The script is great. The director is topnotch. And the cool thing is, I'm actually getting paid to do this!" In a stage whisper, he added, "I'd pay them to be in it, but don't let anyone know!" He grinned broadly, winking. Ben laughed.

They walked out into the dusk of the spring evening. "I don't know about you but I'm starving. Let's get a bite to eat."

"Yeah, I didn't take lunch today. I'm working on this big project I'm trying to wrap up and I knew I couldn't stay late tonight." He smiled shyly toward David, who smiled back.

"I'm really glad you called me, Ben."

"Me too. I would have called sooner but this research project has been kind of consuming me. I'm as ready now as I'll ever be though. I want to forget about it for tonight and enjoy this terrific spring weather while it lasts." It was May, and all the

flowers were in full bloom in the parks and along the rivers. The days were warm but the nights remained pleasantly cool. It was Ben's favorite time of year.

"No problem. I figured you'd call when you were ready. So where should we eat?"

"Anywhere you want. I feel kind of overdressed compared to you though." He looked down at his dark suit and tie, the requisite uniform for Wall Street.

"No, I'm underdressed compared to you!" David laughed. "You could take off the tie and unbutton a few buttons. Anyway, who cares, right? This is New York! I know this great Indian place just a few blocks from here, if you like Indian, that is."

"I love it. Let's go." Deciding David's idea was a good one, Ben pulled his tie from his neck and rolled it carefully before slipping it into his jacket pocket. He took off the jacket and slung it over his shoulder, feeling more at ease. As they passed a subway station entrance, he asked, "So you take the subway in from Queens, I guess? Or the train? You don't drive your car into Manhattan, do you?"

"God, no. I'd end up spending everything I earn just to keep it in a garage, not to mention the scratches and dents it would suffer at the hands of those parking attendants. I can make it into the city in a half-hour if the subway is running on time. I use the time to learn my lines. Sometimes I forget where I am and start saying them out loud. You should see some of the looks I get."

Ben laughed, adding, "I take the subway to work too. No point in owning a car in the city. Who needs the hassle?" That agreed upon, they walked along in companionable silence for a while.

"Here it is," David said. They stopped in front of a small restaurant with the words *Tandoori Kitchen* painted in gold lettering on the glass door. A small man with black oiled hair and a broad smile welcomed them inside. The place was long and narrow, most of the tables filled. The rich aroma of stewing curries, fresh bread and exotic spices filled the air. They found a seat near the back. Ben ordered a beer while David asked for an iced chai. Together they decided on several dishes to share.

After a bit of small talk, Ben asked the question he'd been wanting to since they'd first met. "I've learned from past mistakes never to assume anything when it comes to relationships, so I'm going to ask straight out. Are you involved with anyone right now?"

David took a sip of his chai and focused his dark blue eyes on Ben. "I'm not seriously involved at the moment. I have friends who are a little more than friends, if you know what I mean." He grinned. "I was pretty serious about a guy for a while. He moved away about four months ago, to 'make it big' in California. Fellow starving actor. He wanted me to go with him but I love New York and didn't want to leave. I don't see myself in movies and everything just seems so plastic in L.A. It was an amicable parting of the ways. We've both moved on, I guess."

Ben nodded. "It's a drag when love and career seem to go off in different directions."

"Yeah, I guess. It was bound to happen sooner or later. I'd just as soon keep things casual until I find Mr. Right." They both laughed. "I'm twenty-seven and in no particular hurry to settle down."

"Me either," Ben responded. "I'm twenty-nine. Carl is thirty-five. I really thought for a while he might be 'the one'. But things just got too intense. He said I was afraid of making a commitment and claimed I used the 'intense' angle as an excuse."

"Did you?"

"No, I really don't think so. I don't know if you could get a sense from the few moments you saw him, but he can be very controlling. He doesn't like being told no about anything. He's good-looking and smart, and used to getting what he wants. I think it threw him when I was the one to break things off. He can be extremely charming and persuasive. It works well in his job and it worked with me for longer than I care to admit."

"Well," David said softly, "I'm glad you're here with me tonight."

"Me too." They smiled happily at one another.

It was ten o'clock. They'd enjoyed a delicious meal and after a long day at work and two beers, Ben was very tired. Apologetically he said, "I have to be up early tomorrow for work. I'd probably better head home."

"I've got nowhere to be until a one o'clock photo shoot. Maybe I could walk you home?"

Ben laughed. "It'd be a long walk, but you could ride the subway with me, if you want. You could catch a train from there to Queens."

"Sounds like a plan."

They sat close together on the train, their thighs just barely touching. Ben felt desire leaping along his nerve endings. He resisted an impulse to put his hand on David's leg, to feel his muscular thigh, to let his fingers glide toward his crotch...

He faced the window, staring at the darkness of the tunnel as they raced underground toward his station. On top of the sexual attraction, Ben found himself pleasantly surprised by what a nice time he'd had. He realized he'd half expected, because he was so handsome, for David to be vain and self-absorbed. Instead David had turned out to be bright, modest and funny. He didn't seem to take himself too seriously, which was quite a pleasant change from Carl.

Ben didn't protest when David offered to walk the block and a half to his apartment building from the subway station. He found he didn't want to say goodbye. At his stoop, David leaned forward for a chaste kiss. As their lips met, Ben's body recalled the heated kiss they'd shared in the car. This time he was the one to take David's face in his hands, parting his lips as he pulled him closer. They kissed a moment before David pulled back. Glancing toward passersby, he said, "I know it's New York, but still..."

Ben felt his face heat. Normally he was more discreet. "I'm sorry," he said throatily. "I didn't mean to do that."

"No apology necessary," David answered. "In fact, I'd love to continue, if it wasn't too late?" He gestured toward the door.

Ben was tingling with desire. A voice in his head reminded him he'd promised to go slow. It was late. He had to be up in seven hours. The voice was ignored as he said, "What the hell? Sleep is for the meek."

David looked around the small but comfortably furnished apartment. The floors were hardwood, the walls painted a muted gold. The furniture was mostly old brown leather, well worn but finely crafted pieces that stood the test of time. Two large bookcases filled to overflowing dominated one wall. The room had a peaceful, warm feel to it.

"You like to read, huh?"

"Yeah. And collect first editions. I've read everything in those shelves. I can't bear to get rid of a book, even if I didn't like it. Something about the printed word." He laughed.

"I think that's great. I want to read more. Maybe you could recommend a few good ones."

"Sure, though at the moment I kind of had something else in mind..." As Ben moved toward him, David felt his pulse quicken. He hadn't expected to enjoy Ben's company as much as he had. He realized he had assumed, because of Ben's occupation as a research analyst, he'd be boring, droning on about investment patterns and economic trends, or whatever people like him talked about. Instead Ben had been full of lively, funny observations about the theater—it turned out he went to plays regularly, even holding season tickets to a particularly favorite playhouse of his in the Village.

Instead of bragging about his degree from NYU, he had shrugged with honest indifference when David admitted over dinner he'd only completed one semester of college and felt it was too late to return now. "Degrees are overrated," Ben said, his voice sincere. "Anyone with enough money and energy can get one. They open doors on certain careers, but that's about it. I use very little of what I learned in school in my job. Life's the best education, if you ask me."

David forgot his train of thought as Ben stepped closer. Still standing they kissed again, this time wrapping their arms around one another. They were the same height at just over six feet, though Ben was thinner, his muscles leaner. David dared to drop his hands down to Ben's ass, cupping the cheeks through the lightweight wool pants. To his delight, he felt Ben's hands doing the same to him. As a result, their bodies were pressed together, cock nudging cock.

After several minutes of exploring each other's mouths, Ben dropped his arms and stepped back, his face flushed. His hazel eyes seemed to spill out light. Breathlessly he said, "Can I get you a drink or something?"

David realized he was thirsty. Something else was at play as well. Where he was usually eager to get a new guy right into bed, for some reason he found himself

wanting to take his time with Ben. There was something at once vulnerable and sexy as hell about the guy. He wanted to draw out the anticipation a while longer. "Yeah," he said, "that would be good. What have you got?"

"Orange juice, vodka, beer, milk, Dr. Pepper..."

"Dr. Pepper!" David laughed. "Who drinks Dr. Pepper?"

"I do! It's the best soda there is, bar none. It used to be hard to get up here but New York has finally caught up with the times." Ben had told David over dinner he was a transplant from Texas, having come up for college and never left. When David expressed surprise, noting his lack of a Southern twang, Ben admitted he'd never felt at home in Texas. Getting into NYU was his chance to escape and he'd never looked back.

David said, "I'll try a Dr. Pepper. I've never had it before."

"You won't be disappointed." Ben gave him an approving nod. He preceded David into the small kitchen just off the living room. He had a nice view of Ben's shapely ass and narrow hips as he bent into the open refrigerator to retrieve two cans of his favorite soda. He handed one to David and said with a pop of the top, "Cheers."

David opened his can and took a drink. "Hey, this isn't bad. Very refreshing. I don't usually drink soda but I could get used to this."

"Told you," Ben said, grinning. "The elixir of the gods."

"Well, I wouldn't go that far," David laughed. "But as soda pop goes, it'll do." He watched Ben as he drank deeply from his can. He wanted to see more of the chest mostly hidden by the white-collared shirt with only two buttons opened. "I've only ever seen you in a suit," he remarked casually. "Do you have other clothes?"

"Actually I sleep in specially designed pajamas. They look just like a suit, complete with a tie. It's part of my Wall Street persona, you see." He looked so serious for a split second David almost believed him. They both laughed at the same time.

Ben moved into the living room. "Come, sit down. I'll go change out of my 'uniform'." He drew quotation marks in the air as he disappeared into what must be his bedroom. David sat on the well-worn, soft leather sofa, sipping his drink as he glanced around the room. There was a CD player and several hundred CDs in neat rows along narrow shelving. No TV was in sight.

Ben returned in a few moments, wearing a thick cotton T-shirt of dark green and old blue jeans with a tear in one knee. His feet were bare. "My comfy clothes," he said, smiling as he sat next to David on the couch.

"Suits you better," David said appreciatively. Ben looked even sexier in his casual clothing, his broad shoulders and muscular biceps outlined in the snug-fitting T-shirt. His eyelashes were very long, a darker blond than his wheat-colored curling hair. The green shirt turned his hazel eyes a clear emerald green. He had laugh lines radiating from the corners of his eyes and deeply etched lines framing his mouth like parentheses when he smiled, which was often. With his crooked nose and lined face, he wasn't a "pretty boy" as David sometimes disparagingly thought of himself. He was all man, even down to the tuft of sexy chest hair curling at the V of his shirt.

"Where were we?" Ben asked softly, setting his empty can on the small coffee table in front of the sofa. David set his there as well, angling himself so he was facing Ben. They leaned toward one another, their mouths meeting as their hands explored each other's bodies. David slipped his hand beneath the fabric of Ben's shirt, moving up his firm belly to feel the hard muscles of his chest covered in soft, curling chest hair.

Ben copied his actions, lifting the hem of David's shirt to slide his own hands against David's smooth chest. They moaned against each other's mouth, neither finding their sitting position satisfactory. Ben pressed forward, pushing David back against the sofa. He felt Ben's body heavy over his as he continued to kiss him. He could feel Ben's cock, hard as steel against the layers of denim that separated them. His own was just as hard, aching with desire for the sexy man on top of him.

Normally he would have taken charge. He would have been the one to push Ben to the couch, to pull his shirt from his body, to open his pants and grab his hard cock with eager hands. Yet something stayed him. It was thrilling just to let Ben kiss and touch him, his hand roaming freely over his chest but not straying lower. David closed his eyes as Ben left his mouth, licking from his throat down to his collarbone. David shivered with pleasure, his heart thrumming in his chest.

"I wanted to do that the first time I saw you," Ben whispered huskily. "You're so hot."

"So are you," David whispered. Ben pushed David's T-shirt higher, moving down so he could kiss and lick David's chest. He lightly bit David's nipple, running his tongue over it until it became erect. He did the same with the other before sliding back up to find David's mouth.

David felt him pulling at the button and drawing the zipper down over the bulge at his crotch. Electricity exploded through his senses as Ben placed his hand over David's cock. His fingers danced over the fabric, tickling and teasing David's cock to a bone-hard erection.

When he felt Ben's hand slip past the waistband of his underwear, David couldn't help his moan. "Ah, god." He knew he was going to come just from Ben's fingers lightly stroking through his underwear. He didn't want to do that—didn't want to ejaculate like an overeager kid having sex for the first time. He pulled himself up and Ben's hand fell away.

"Something wrong?" Ben asked. He sat back, allowing David to pull himself into a sitting position. "I thought you wanted—"

"I do!" David cut him off. "More than anything. It's just if you keep on like that, I'm going to..."

Ben's eyes were glittering with lust. He ran his hands through his hair as he took a breath. "I'm going too fast." He gave a small laugh. "Me, the one who said he wanted to take it slow. You're just so damn sexy."

David felt warm with pleasure at his words. "You should know this isn't typical behavior for me either, but in the other direction. I usually leap before I look. If I'm into

a guy, I'm always eager to get him into bed before I get to know him too well and realize I don't like him." He grinned as Ben laughed. In a more serious tone he added, "Somehow with you it's different. I want to savor it. I don't want to just have you jerk me off on the couch. When we do make love, I want it to be extra special. I want it to be real."

Ben nodded slowly. "Me too," he said softly. "We've got time."

David glanced down at his watch. "Well, you don't. Not tonight anyway. It's nearly midnight! I've definitely overstayed my welcome. I know you have to get up super early." He waited for Ben to protest, to ask him to stay the night, to say to hell with work and take him again in his arms.

He wasn't sure if he was disappointed or pleased when Ben stood and replied, "I know. You're right. Normally it wouldn't matter, but I've been working on this particular stock for several weeks now and tomorrow I'm making my recommendation."

"I completely understand. Maybe this weekend? We could pick up where we left off..." He gazed hungrily at Ben's crotch, the outline of his erect cock still pressing against the denim. He said he completely understood, but in fact, he did not. Not on a gut level. While he knew he should leave, his body was hot with desire, nearly desperate to taste Ben's cock, to feel his heat.

Ben, unaware of the turmoil in David's head, answered only the words that had been spoken. "Yes, absolutely. I would like that very much." They kissed once more, fanning the fire in David's belly. He leaned forward, closing his eyes, silently willing Ben to change his mind. He pulled him toward him, grinding his erection against Ben's. For a moment it seemed to be working. Ben kissed him ardently and held him tightly. Finally he pulled back, twisting out of David's embrace.

"Good night, David," he said with a small smile. His color was high, the desire obviously still raging through him. Yet he was sending David home. David frowned. He was not used to men resisting him. In his experience, when he snapped his fingers, men obeyed. He knew usually they were just responding to his classic good looks, not to who he was as a person. But he also knew he'd used that attraction to his advantage, having sex with whatever man caught his eye, usually ending up bored within the week.

He found himself all the more attracted to this "hard to get" man. Ben was obviously passionate and clearly interested in him, but he wasn't ready to leap into bed on the first date. Though technically, wasn't it the second? David grinned to himself and let go, accepting Ben's decision at last with as much grace as he could muster.

"I'll call you tomorrow once I get this presentation out of the way. Maybe we could grab dinner again," Ben said. "I know a great sushi bar."

"My favorite," David replied. They walked together down the single flight of stairs to the foyer. He didn't try to kiss Ben again. Touching his arm lightly, he said, "I had a great time."

"Me too. I'm looking forward to tomorrow."

David looked into Ben's clear hazel eyes, using all his willpower to appear nonchalant and relaxed, though the embers of desire still burned hot in his veins. In a light voice, as if he were joking, he said, "I'll count the minutes."

* * * * *

Alone in his living room, Carl fingered the key with the words *Do not duplicate* engraved in small letters on the head. It was the key to the outer door of Ben's apartment house, the one he'd returned at Ben's insistence. It was the key he'd stolen again before walking out, lifting it from the small lacquered box Ben kept on the hall table near his front door when Ben's back was turned. On his key ring, he also had the key to Ben's apartment. He'd returned the spare Ben had given him along with the building key. Ben didn't know he had a duplicate in his glove compartment.

It had been five days since Ben had walked out on him at Jeanette's wedding, going off with another man as if the past six months had meant nothing to him—nothing at all. Surely love still lingered in Ben's heart? He was just feeling his oats, playing hard to get, punishing Carl for some perceived infraction.

Carl would wait him out—he would win in the end. He always did. He was a patient man. He knew how to wait when negotiating a deal for his firm, sizing up his opposition with confidence and acumen, choosing just the right moment to tip his hand.

He planned to apply the same sort of determination in winning back his lover. To do so, he decided, he'd need to know what he was up against. He didn't try to see Ben, whose offices were on the fifth floor of the building where his much more prestigious investment bank occupied the tenth through fifteenth floors. He didn't call him or even stop by his apartment. He would let Ben think he'd accepted it was over between them.

A week should be sufficient to put Ben at his ease. He would bide his time just a little longer. This Saturday he would begin his stakeout, just to see what Ben was doing, he told himself. It wasn't as if he were a stalker or anything—he just wanted to know Ben's routine now that he'd thrust Carl from his life, tossing him away like so much garbage.

Slipping the key deep into his pants pocket, Carl stood and moved toward the front door. He didn't feel like cooking and there was nothing handy in the refrigerator or pantry to eat. He'd get some Chinese and watch a DVD or two. With a pang, he thought how before Ben had left him, they would have chosen the DVD together at the corner video store, perhaps arguing in a friendly way over which movie they were in the mood to see.

He thought of Ben's unruly blond hair, his wide, easy smile and the way his eyes crinkled into half moons when he grinned. Just to see him again was enough reason to return to Ben's street and wait for a parking space with a good view of Ben's front door. The weather was supposed to be excellent this Saturday. No doubt Ben would be up bright and early, ready for a jog around the park near his home.

Unless... Carl's thoughts darkened as he saw the scene in his mind's eye...Ben and that David Anderson character, naked and entwined in the six-hundred-thread-count Egyptian cotton sheets Carl had bought for Ben's bed, for the two of them to lie on, not Ben and another man! He felt a vein in his forehead begin to throb and forced himself to calm down. Even if Ben were sleeping with the guy, he'd soon see whatever meaningless sex they might engage in was nothing to the beautiful, intense relationship Ben and he had shared together.

He stepped out of his townhouse and walked down the block, his hands shoved deep in his pockets, his face twisted into an unconscious scowl.

Chapter Three

David watched Ben emerge from the subway station across the street from the Japanese restaurant where they had agreed to meet. His heart did a little flip-flop at the sight of him. Ben looked his way at that moment and his face lit up with undisguised happiness. David smiled and gave a small wave.

He wouldn't have admitted to anyone how much he'd been looking forward to tonight. It had been all he could do to keep from calling Ben from the moment he'd awakened that Friday morning. He'd flipped open his cell phone a dozen times, sometimes even punching in Ben's number, though he never pushed the send button. Ben had said he would call. Usually that would have suited David. He wasn't the sort of man who called a new lover every five minutes just to make contact. Dare he call Ben a lover? Not yet—a potential lover then. He preferred a cooler approach. Let the other guy wonder. Let the other guy be the "hot and bothered" one.

"Hi there!" Ben called as he crossed the street. "Sorry I'm late. The usual Friday night crush trying to get a train."

"I just got here myself," David lied. In fact he'd been waiting nearly thirty minutes, having left his Queens apartment with plenty of time to spare. He resisted the urge to grab Ben and pull him close. He wanted to taste his lips again, to feel the press of his hard body against his own. He took a breath, willing himself to relax.

It was Ben who made the first move, lightly embracing him before stepping back to say, "This place has the best sushi in Manhattan. I like to sit at the bar and watch them make it. I almost hate to eat their amazing creations. It's edible art."

"Edible being the key word," David laughed. "I'm starving."

Ben's presentation had gone well and David listened as he talked about it, trying to focus on his words instead of getting lost in his eyes. He loved the way they changed color with whatever he was wearing or with how the light hit them. Tonight they tended more toward gray, though a ring of green circled the iris. They were beautiful, soulful eyes. David had to force himself to look away.

Distracted, he realized too late he'd added a bit too much wasabi to the tender tuna and sticky rice he'd just popped into his mouth. He felt the fire rising up through his sinuses and his eyes began to water. "You okay?" Ben asked. David pointed to the spicy horseradish and coughed.

"Too much wasabi, huh? That stuff can be lethal. Would you like some saki to wash it down?" He pointed to the small empty china cup next to David's plate as he lifted the bottle.

David drank some water, wiped his eyes and shook his head. "No thanks. Not a big saki fan. I don't drink much at all really."

"I've noticed," Ben said. "Good thing I don't mind drinking alone." He poured himself another cup of the hot rice wine.

The petite Japanese waitress cleared their empty plates with a shy smile, offering seaweed ice cream, which they both declined. "The Japanese make delicious food but their desserts leave something to be desired," David said.

"I agree. We could go somewhere else for dessert. Or we could go back to my place." Ben's gaze was suddenly intense. David felt something unspoken zipping between them. Dessert held no appeal whatsoever, unless Ben was included on the menu.

With a studied casualness he said, "Your place sounds good."

They were both quiet on the short subway ride to Ben's apartment. Ben leaned back in his seat, closing his eyes, a small smile on his lips. This gave David a chance to examine his profile. There was strength in his features but also kindness. His lips were full and sensual, curved in a slight smile. David resisted an impulse to lean over and kiss him, to crush those ripe, red lips with his own. Feeling the beginnings of an erection, he crossed his legs and stared up at the advertisements to distract himself.

When they arrived at his apartment, Ben said, "Just let me change. Make yourself comfortable." David sat on the couch, leaning back with a happy sigh. It had been a long time since he'd connected so quickly with someone. Beyond their obvious physical attraction, he genuinely enjoyed their conversation.

In a moment Ben was back, dressed again in faded jeans and a T-shirt, his feet bare. David, who rarely wore suits except when modeling them for magazines, was wearing lightweight brown linen slacks and a white shirt open at the throat.

"Shall I make coffee?" Ben offered.

"Only if you want it," David replied. *What I want is you*, he thought. Aloud he said, "I really like your place. It's very relaxing and homey."

"Thanks. I've been here a few years. I've had time to make it my own." He sat down next to David. "Carl wanted me to give it up and move in with him. He has a much bigger place. A two-story townhouse. I just knew it wasn't right somehow. Even when I thought I loved him, something always held me back. I think deep down I always knew we weren't really right for each other."

"It's amazing how we can keep things from ourselves. Then later we realize the clues were there all along – we just didn't want to see them."

"Yeah," Ben grinned. "Super-hot sex can make you deaf, dumb and blind." He reached out suddenly, placing his hand on David's thigh. His touch sent a shiver of desire directly to David's cock. "I don't want to talk about Carl anymore." He lifted his hand to stroke David's cheek. His eyes crinkled into a smile along with his lips. "I've been waiting all night to do this." Gently he pulled David toward him, his eyes fluttering shut as their lips met.

David felt all his nerve endings leap to attention, electrified by Ben's mouth on his, his arms circling around him as they moved closer. They kissed for several moments, hands again roaming as they had the night before.

He felt Ben pulling away and nearly cried out with frustration. He steeled himself for Ben's kind but firm declaration he was tired and it was late. He wouldn't force himself on him as he had the night before, shamelessly grinding his cock against him in a last-ditch effort to seduce him. No, he would calmly thank his host for a nice evening and suggest they meet again soon.

"Would you stay tonight?" Ben asked softly.

David seemed startled by his question. Ben worried for a moment he'd been too forward. Slowly David smiled. "I thought you'd never ask."

Arm in arm they moved together toward the bedroom. Though they barely knew one another, Ben felt as if he'd known David for a long time. It had been so easy to talk to him—to confide about his failed relationship with Carl, to talk about stress at work, to discuss the theater with someone who was even more impassioned about it than he was. He loved the fact David wasn't in banking or anything remotely connected with business. Talk didn't invariably turn to discussion of stock-market trends, the latest high-finance maneuvers or who was embezzling from whom.

In his relationship with Carl, he'd been the one to listen and Carl the one to hold forth. Somehow between them they'd created the fiction Carl was the brilliant one and Ben merely the bright but by definition inferior intellect. Carl's ideas and opinions mattered more somehow. He knew this wasn't entirely Carl's fault. He had been complicit in the roles they'd created together. Ben thought of one of his mother's favorite sayings coined by Eleanor Roosevelt. "No one can make you feel inferior without your permission." Somewhere along the line he'd signed the slip, but now that was over. He was his own man once again, free to meet and explore something new with the sexy man standing in front of him.

He watched in aroused fascination as David began to unbutton his white shirt, his fingers slowly revealing his broad chest. He pulled the shirt from his body and tossed it over the chair in front of Ben's computer desk. Ben pulled his own T-shirt over his head as David stepped out of his shoes and pulled off his socks.

They continued to stare at one another as they opened their pants and pulled them down, each kicking them away as they moved together. Ben felt a moment's shyness as David pulled down his black silk underwear and tossed it onto the heap of clothing on the floor. His eye was drawn to the already erect shaft bobbing invitingly from David's groin. They moved together in a sensual dance perfectly choreographed between them as if they'd rehearsed it a dozen times.

David's body was smooth and strong, his skin glowing with a light tan, the muscles rippling beneath it. As they came together, their lips met, parting in mutual desire. Ben closed his eyes, thrilling to the touch of this new man. He felt David's hands sliding

down his sides. He allowed David to drag his underwear past his hips so his erect cock sprang free.

David curled his fingers around Ben's shaft and he moaned against David's mouth. David pulled away, dropping to his knees in front of Ben. The wet heat of his tongue and lips against the head of his cock made Ben gasp. He ran his fingers through David's hair. It was soft and shiny, slipping through his fingers like rippling silk as David lowered his head, taking Ben's cock deep in his throat.

For a moment Ben thought he must be dreaming. He'd imagined this scene and many others like it since the night before. He had been the aggressor that first night, teasing David's thick, hard cock. Yet he'd also been the one to pull back and send David away. Alone in his bed he'd stroked himself to orgasm, almost wishing he hadn't sent him away, worrying perhaps he'd given the impression he was a cock-tease.

He knew tonight he would not send him away. Too many times he'd fallen into bed with a guy, and while the sex was fun, too often when it was over, there was nothing left to say but goodbye. This time he knew it was different. There hadn't been a false step yet between them. He could hardly believe he'd met a new man so soon after Carl and he had called it quits.

He'd expected, even looked forward to, being on his own for the foreseeable future. He was tired of intensity – at least the kind of intensity Carl provided. Toward the end, the passionate, hot sex they'd shared was nearly always offset by jealousy, recriminations and guilt.

David did something with his throat muscles that made all thoughts fly out of Ben's mind. Delicious sensations traveled the length of his cock and he was suddenly weak in the knees. "I need to sit," he managed to gasp, gripping David's shoulders for support. David milked him a little more before taking pity on him. He released Ben's cock and stood, his laugh low and seductive, his blue eyes flashing.

"Lie down," he commanded softly. "I'm not done with you." Ben obeyed, falling onto his back as David knelt between his legs, again lowering his head over his groin. He licked a spiraling circle along Ben's cock from head to base, his tongue traveling down past his balls to the tender, warm flesh just below. The sensation was indescribable as he licked in long, sure strokes. Ben felt the tip of David's tongue against his entrance but it didn't linger, gliding back up the perineum before returning again to tease the puckered opening.

Ben grabbed his own cock, pumping it as David licked and teased him. He was plunged into ecstasy as David's tongue slipped past the asterisk between his ass cheeks. David put a hand on either thigh, pushing them up and back for better access. All too soon Ben felt his balls tightening. He knew he was about to come. When David's tongue slid up again toward his balls, a velvet heat slid through his blood.

David pushed Ben's hands away, closing his mouth instead over Ben's shaft. His body spasmed in uncontrolled pleasure as he groaned his approval. David continued to lick and suckle him until Ben lay limp and spent on the bed.

When he could speak, he said, "I didn't mean to do that. Not so fast."

"I did," David answered. He sidled up next to Ben, running his hand over his chest. "That was very sexy. I loved watching you come."

Ben felt his face heat but he smiled. He wanted to return the favor, to do far more than simply return it, but he hadn't the strength. Because David hadn't shared the saki he'd ordered for two, he'd ended up finishing the bottle himself. That, coupled with a long week at work and the earth-shattering orgasm David had just wrested from him, seemed to have turned him to jelly. He tried to lift his head but gave up, letting it fall back to the pillow.

He could feel David's cock, hard and long against his side as David continued to stroke his chest. He turned his head toward him. "I want to do that for you, David. I want to taste you, to please you." In a moment he would. He would get up and position himself between David's legs. He would grip David's hard cock, teasing the silky shaft with his fingers before taking its length into his mouth. He would make David moan and sigh as David had done to him. He would lavish all his attention and what skill he possessed to make his new lover cry out with ecstasy. In a moment he would do that. Just another moment to rest...just a little longer to collect his strength...

David smiled ruefully when he realized Ben was asleep. He fell over onto his back, idly stroking his own cock. He wondered if he should try to wake him or just let him rest. He supposed it was a compliment of sorts he'd knocked the guy out. He turned again toward Ben, studying his face. He looked younger in repose, as most people did, David supposed. Lightly he touched the bump at the bridge of Ben's crooked nose. It was an imperfect face but a compelling one, the cheekbones high and prominent, the lips full and sensual.

David got up quietly and went into Ben's bathroom. It was small and neat. He found and used Ben's toothbrush, hoping he wouldn't mind. He honestly hadn't expected Ben to invite him to stay the night. Did the invitation still hold good, given his host had passed out? Did he want to stay? It was near midnight. The thought of riding the subway home held scant appeal. He was tired too, he realized, though his blood still quietly simmered with unrequited desire.

He retrieved his pants and underwear from the floor and grabbed his shirt from the chair. Finding a hanger in Ben's bedroom closet, he hung his things there, tucking his underwear into a pants pocket. He placed his shoes, the socks rolled inside, out of the way so no one would trip over them. Finally he collected Ben's clothing and hung the shirt and pants. The underwear he tossed into a hamper in the bathroom.

Flicking off the bedside lamp, he climbed back into bed with the still-sleeping man, pulling the covers over them both as he snuggled against Ben's warm, naked body. He was touched by Ben's trust—to fall asleep like that meant he felt safe and comfortable with David, a thought that pleased him more than he would have expected. There was time for hot sex later. They had all the time in the world, didn't they? With this happy

thought, David closed his eyes, his cheek resting on the masculine chest of his new lover, whose heart lulled him to sleep with its steady rhythm.

David awoke with a start, for a moment thinking he was in his own bed in his tiny garage apartment. He'd been having an amazing dream, sensual and hot. He wanted to return to his dream. As he closed his eyes again, something warm and wet sheathed his cock, making him arch toward it in pleasure as he came fully awake.

He wasn't in his own bed, he was with Ben! His erotic dream was no doubt fueled by what was happening between his legs. In the light of the streetlamp shining through the open window, David saw Ben's silhouette as he crouched at his cock.

Ben's head was moving as he lifted and lowered himself over David's cock, his hands cradling David's balls and gripping the base of his shaft. "Ben," David gasped, lifting his head. Ben let his cock go, looking at David's face, his teeth flashing white in the silvery light of the room.

"It's a dream," he murmured, echoing David's first thought. "Just a dream. Close your eyes and lie back down. Sleep..."

David sighed with pleasure as Ben's warm mouth again sought his cock, taking it deep in his throat as his hands worked magic of their own. He knew he was awake, yet the images from the dream, inspired by Ben's attentions, floated again into his mind. They were drifting together on a raft piled high with pillows, somewhere in a warm, calm sea. A gentle breeze kissed their naked bodies as they lay together, each stroking the other's cock.

David's breath came faster as Ben increased the pace and intensity with his tongue, lapping and sucking at his cock. David lifted his hips, eager for Ben to take him as deeply as possible. Ben complied, his nose touching David's flat belly as he took him to the hilt. "Ben..." David drew out the word like a caress...Ben... Pleasure burned through his body like a drug as he spurted his seed down Ben's throat.

His heart was pounding against his ribs. He lay still, a smile easing itself onto his face as he let his eyes close. The dream was dispelled, replaced by the very real and sexy man curling up beside him. "I wanted to return the favor," Ben whispered into his ear. "Instead I feel like I got another gift. You are so hot, did you know that, David? I'm not just talking about your looks, which is the obvious thing. You're so responsive, so able to let yourself go. And you taste so good! I swear I could do that all night."

David laughed with embarrassed pleasure. "If that was a dream," he said, "I don't ever want to wake up." He turned on his side and Ben turned with him, so his ass was cradled against David's groin. David reached around to find Ben's cock, which hardened perceptively at his touch. This time it was David, as well-intentioned as Ben had been, who drifted away into sleep, his fingers still curled lovingly around Ben's shaft.

* * * * *

"What is it! What is it!" David cried. His eyes flew open as he sat bolt upright in the bed.

He realized Ben was speaking urgently to him. "You're only dreaming. Wake up! Whatever it is, it isn't real. You're here with me." David took a deep, shuddering breath. He could feel his heart hammering in his chest.

"What? What happened?"

"You screamed. You scared me to death. Then I realized you were only having a nightmare, so I've been trying to wake you up."

"Oh," David looked away, waiting for the dark grip of the nightmare to ease. "I'm sorry," he mumbled. "I get them sometimes. I'm sorry I woke you."

"Hey, don't worry about that. I was only dozing anyway. I can't believe we slept this late. It's already after eight." Sunlight painted them both in gold and David realized it was indeed morning. Ben stroked his tousled hair from his forehead in a tender gesture that made David's heart squeeze.

With a concerned expression he said, "You screamed as if someone were trying to kill you. Do you remember the nightmare?"

"No," David lied. "It's just a haze now. A blur." As Ben continued to look at him with concern, he added, "Something to do with a car accident." *Everything to do with a car accident.* The same nightmare he'd had for the last nine years. Damn, why had that stupid nightmare slipped its way into his dreams their first night together!

"A car accident? Were you the driver?"

"Yes. I mean, no. I don't remember." He pushed off the covers and swung his legs over the edge of the bed. "I'm fine now. I just need to get up—get moving. That's the best way for me to dispel it." He stood and moved toward Ben's closet, retrieving his underwear. As he pulled them on, he saw Ben watching him, the admiration stark on his face.

"You should do underwear ads," Ben said, apparently satisfied David had fully recovered. "Those huge spreads on the sides of buildings. I bet you'd cause quite a few car wrecks yourself."

David smiled, glad Ben was willing to let the nightmare drop. "I have done underwear ads but only in catalogs. I'm not sure I'd like to see myself plastered up on billboards in nothing but my underpants!"

"You can just pose for me then," Ben said, his eyes twinkling. "Say, are you hungry? I make some mean pancakes. I have fresh blueberries too."

"Sounds perfect. Should we shower first?"

"No," Ben said, drawing his tongue seductively over his upper lip. "We'll save that for after."

* * * * *

Carl almost missed them as they stepped out into the morning sunshine. He'd been waiting for over two hours—Ben was usually up and out on a Saturday morning well before ten o'clock, which it was now. It had begun to occur to him that maybe Ben wasn't there at all! Maybe he was already staying over at David's place, wherever that was. He'd been toying with the idea of using his key to find out, but hadn't wanted to take the risk. Not yet.

He was changing stations on the radio when he glanced up to see the two men step out, not touching, but walking close, the intimacy clearly implied between them. Ben was dressed in white shorts and sneakers. His T-shirt was red. David was more formally dressed in slacks and a button-down shirt. *Of course, because he slept over and didn't bring a change of clothing.* Carl felt jealous anger rise like bile in his throat.

He watched them cross the street toward the park Ben liked to frequent. Ben would probably do a morning run. David couldn't run in that getup. Maybe he'd just sit on a bench and jerk off while he watched Carl's lover jog in front of him. Carl shook his head. This wasn't productive.

He needed to keep his wits about him and think clearly. If Ben were going for a run in the park, he'd return home to shower before going anywhere else. Carl touched the key to the outer door of Ben's apartment house, which now hung on his key ring along with the duplicate apartment key. He probably had a good half-hour before they returned. He'd be in and out in ten minutes.

Quickly he approached Ben's building, glad for once it didn't have a doorman. He used to chide Ben for living in a place without one. It was too easy for people to get in when tenants left the building.

He tried not to look furtive as he turned the key in the lock and slipped inside. Even if he saw someone who lived in one of the other units, they'd recognize him as a frequent guest of Ben's. It had only been a short while since Ben had broken his heart, after all.

He saw no one as he loped up the stairs toward Ben's door. Again he glanced to the left and right as he used the spare apartment key he'd never told Ben he had. He opened the door and quickly entered, shutting it behind him. He leaned against it a moment, breathing in the familiar scent of the place—part Ben's cologne, part old leather and book bindings, part the essence of the room itself.

Maybe if he hadn't pressed Ben to give it up. He knew how much Ben loved his musty books and his ratty old furniture. He shouldn't have put the place down, even though his brownstone was so obviously superior. Still, he should have been more sensitive. He knew that now. If only Ben would give him another chance, they could start fresh. They could take it as slow as Ben wanted. Carl wouldn't press, he wouldn't demand. He'd let Ben take his time. He'd keep better control of his temper. He'd even take an anger-management course as Ben had suggested toward the end of their relationship. At the time he'd laughed it off—Ben liked to exaggerate things. But if it meant so much to him, sure—he'd do it.

He looked quickly around the room, not even sure what he was looking for. It appeared the same as when he'd been welcome there. He walked through to the bedroom. The bed was made but rumpled, as if the covers had been hastily pulled up, not smoothed and tightly tucked as Carl preferred. He riffled through the closet, looking for signs of another man's clothes. He saw only Ben's familiar things. On an impulse he leaned in to one of Ben's suit jackets, inhaling the traces of his cologne still lingering at the lapel. Angrily he blinked away the tears that sprang to his eyes.

He entered the bathroom, again looking for signs someone else was staying there. He saw only the one toothbrush in its holder. The second holder that had once housed Carl's spare toothbrush was empty. At least the guy hadn't moved in! There was still a chance to win Ben back.

He stroked the stack of neatly folded thick, yellow towels on the shelf, his mind veering helplessly toward an image of Ben kneeling at his new lover's feet, lovingly drying his legs and cock as he used to do for Carl. He liked Ben on his knees, but only for him! In a gesture of impotent rage, he swiped at the towels so they fell in a crumpled heap to the floor.

He heard a sound and jerked his head toward the door. He glanced at his watch. He'd only been in the place a few minutes, but there was no point in dallying. They might return unexpectedly. He was, after all, breaking and entering.

He stopped at the hall table by the front door where Ben dropped his mail and keys when he entered his apartment. He flipped through the piles of bills and papers, not sure what he was looking for until he found it. He saw a business card, turned facedown and picked it up. He read the words *David Anderson, Actor, Model*.

Beside the words was a thumbnail headshot of the undeniably handsome man with home and cell numbers listed below. There was no street address but the phone numbers would probably be enough to get him what he needed. With a grim smile, Carl pocketed the small card and slipped out the door, locking it behind him with a satisfying click.

Chapter Four

"This is great. I love the use of space." Ben turned slowly around the one room that made up David's garage apartment. Though it served as kitchen, bedroom and living space, the area still managed to seem open and airy. Two large windows allowed the fading afternoon light to stream through the room, giving it a warm, buttery glow.

"You like it?" David looked pleased. "When you only have six hundred square feet to work with, you get creative. Beds are space hogs so I built that." He pointed to the loft, beneath which sat a small desk and chair and a large white wardrobe. The desk was piled with papers and binders David later told him contained scripts of plays he had been in or was working on now.

"You built that loft yourself? Handyman, huh?" Ben said. "I'm impressed."

"Let me take you on the extended tour," David said, grinning. "Take two steps this way and you'll see the kitchen." He pointed to one corner of the room where a small stove and refrigerator stood to one side the kitchen sink. There was a stackable washer and dryer on its other side. Two bright yellow kitchen chairs leaned against a wall-mounted drop-leaf table, presently folded against the wall.

"And this," he said, turning ninety degrees, "is the living room." He waved his hand toward the center of the room where a small sofa and a royal blue leather recliner faced a bulky old TV perched on top of sturdy-looking bookshelves. What space was left on the cream-colored walls held four enlarged photographs framed in black.

Ben moved to examine the first one—a very handsome dark-skinned man in repose on a blue chair. He was nude, the light hitting his body in such a way he seemed to be glowing, his skin a rich dark brown. He stared into the camera as if reading its soul. Ben couldn't take his eyes from the arresting photograph. He recognized the chair as the recliner in David's apartment.

"You took this?" he asked softly, already knowing the answer.

"Yes. A hobby of mine. A passion, you might say. I love to play with light and color. To try to make the subject look even more alive than in real life, if you know what I mean. These four pictures are part of a series. My Blue Chair series." He laughed, adding, "Original title right?"

Ben smiled. "You're an artist, David. This picture is incredible." He moved to examine the other three photos hanging along the wall. Each depicted a man sitting or lying on the blue recliner in an artistic pose. They were nude, each one better-looking than the last.

Ben felt a pang of jealousy. Of course David and he were brand-new. Naturally he'd had other men in his life. He wondered for a moment what David saw in him. He

wasn't gorgeous like these guys – not by a long shot. Did he still see these men? Had he been in love with any or all of them? Without stopping to censure himself, Ben asked, "Were these guys all your lovers?"

David looked confused for a moment and then laughed. "What? The subjects of the photos? No, no. They're modeling friends of mine. Two of them are straight and of the other two, while they're very nice eye candy, one is only nineteen and the other is *very* involved with someone."

"Okay then," Ben said.

David laughed and stepped close, lightly kissing Ben's mouth. "Were you jealous? I like that."

"Maybe a little," Ben admitted, leaning in for another kiss. They'd spent a wonderful day – enjoying the fresh air at the park before returning to Ben's place. Their shared shower after Ben's run had been sexy and playful as they soaped one another from head to toe, stopping for long, lingering attention at each other's cock and balls. Without discussing it, each knew that morning wasn't yet the time for the next step in their sexual exploration.

Instead they'd dressed and gone out to see some SoHo art galleries David had been interested in checking out. They'd shared a late lunch at a French bistro and then taken the subway out to David's Jamaica, Queens neighborhood. They were tired in the satisfying way of a day well spent.

"I don't have any Dr. Pepper but would you like some water or seltzer?" David offered.

"Sure, whatever you have is fine." Ben sat on the sofa, watching David retrieve two glasses and pour lemon seltzer over ice. He couldn't remember feeling so happy or so relaxed in a very long time.

David returned to the sofa and handed Ben his glass. He lifted his own and said, "To us."

"I'll drink to that," Ben said, smilingly broadly. They each drained their glass and of one accord set them down on the white-painted wooden end tables that stood on either side of the sofa. Ben felt the hot tug of desire as David pulled him close for a kiss. Since their shower they had barely touched, mindful of being in public. Ben felt his cock rise as David's hands moved over his body.

"I want you," David said. "I've been waiting all day to touch you. I want to feel your body next to mine." As he spoke, David stood and unbuttoned his shirt, pulling it from his body. Ben stood as well, quickly stripping. In a moment the two of them stood naked, each drinking in the sight of the other's hard, sexy physique.

David walked toward his loft, gesturing for Ben to follow. David climbed the ladder and Ben was right behind him. The mattress was thick and firm, covered in a soft cotton patchwork quilt of bright yellows and blues. David pulled it down, revealing fresh, white sheets. He lay back, opening his arms for his lover.

As David's hard cock rubbed against his own, Ben felt his passion boil over. He wanted David so fiercely he could barely breathe. Had it been like this with Carl? Yes, he had to admit, at first the fire had been there between them. Carl had always been the aggressor, taking, demanding, using, conquering. It had been exciting, almost dangerous in a sexy way. Carl had been a masterful lover, commanding Ben to his bidding, pushing his sensual envelope, testing how far he would go.

With Carl it had been understood Ben would always be the one on his knees, worshipping Carl's cock until it was hard enough to penetrate Ben. Though Carl did suck Ben's cock and allow Ben to penetrate him from time to time, implicitly it was understood between them Carl was in control.

With David things were different. They were on equal footing. They were potential partners instead of lover and beloved as the relationship between Carl and Ben had somehow evolved with Carl cast in the role of beloved. With David nothing was defined, and as such, everything was possible.

When Ben whispered, "I want to fuck you," he didn't have to hold his breath, waiting to see if this would be permitted. Instead David reached up along the wall to a shelf that held his clock radio, a few books, a lamp and the small box of condoms he now dipped his hand into.

"I want you too. You have no idea how much," he answered, his eyes bright with lust. Stripping the wrapping from a pre-lubricated condom, he crouched between Ben's legs and rolled the sheath over his erection. "When I first saw you watching me from the pew at the wedding, I imagined this," David said. "I saw myself just like this." He positioned himself on his hands and knees, facing away from Ben. He looked back, his pupils dilated, the tip of his tongue showing between his lips.

Ben felt heat surge through his blood as he knelt behind David. He pressed his shaft between the cleft of David's sexy ass. His cock was rigid—he could feel it throbbing with anticipation. Lightly he pressed against the tight opening. He didn't want to hurt his new lover. From his position, he could see the tube of lubricant beside the box of condoms. Taking it, he squeezed a dollop onto his fingers and smeared it along David's crack. David moaned, pressing back against his fingers.

Taking his cue, Ben pressed two fingers against his entrance. With lubricant on them, they slipped in easily. David moved back so the fingers slid in to the second knuckle. His ass was hot and tight. Ben withdrew his fingers, quickly replacing them with the head of his cock.

Slowly he pressed against the tight opening, gasping with pleasure as the head of his cock popped past the tight ring of muscle. The sensation was indescribable. He gripped David's hips to keep his balance on the mattress. He had to lean forward over David to keep from hitting his head on the ceiling. As a result, he was forced to drape his body over David's from chest to cock, creating an intimate embrace.

Carefully he eased himself the rest of the way, resisting his selfish impulse to slam himself in to the hilt. The clench of David's tight muscles was like a vise of pleasure,

gripping Ben's cock as he began to move and thrust inside his lover. "Jesus, yes, yes!" David cried, arching back hard against Ben.

Excited by David's response, Ben began to thrust harder, waves of pleasure rippling through him with each swivel of David's hips. "Do it!" David cried. "Fuck me! Use me hard! Don't be afraid. I want it. I need it." David's hot words thrilled him. He held him tight as he thrust hard, passion spilling into his blood like liquid fire.

"Oh god," he cried. He was going to come. A part of his mind knew he should slow down, should reach around and fondle David's cock, should make sure David was receiving as much pleasure as he was giving Ben. But the pleasure was simply too great, the drive too intense for him to stop. With a final, savage thrust he came. David fell beneath him, pulling him down on top of him, Ben's cock still buried deep inside. They lay still for some moments, Ben nearly unconscious from his intense orgasm.

He felt David twist, silently signaling he wanted Ben to move. Forcing himself to find the strength, Ben carefully pulled himself from his lover and rolled onto his back. As the initial euphoria of his climax began to fade, his mind switched back on, bringing with it some guilt. "Hey," he said softly. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to come so fast. I didn't mean to leave you hanging..."

David flipped over onto his back next to Ben. Deftly he stripped the used condom from Ben's flagging cock and dropped it into a plastic bowl farther down on the shelf. "You didn't, lover boy. I nearly came just from having you in my ass. It was incredible. You filled me up completely, just how I like. And don't worry, I'm not done with you. I'm just waiting for you to recover enough to service me."

"Service you, huh?" Ben grinned. "What am I, your stud?"

"You got that right," David replied jauntily.

"Well, I can't think of anything I'd rather do, except for the fact I don't think I can move. You totally used me up!"

"You don't have to move. For what I have in mind you can stay right where you are." David shifted, moving until he was straddling Ben's chest. He leaned forward, his hands flat against the mattress on either side of Ben, his erect cock bobbing just at Ben's lips.

Ben didn't need to be told what to do. Eagerly he opened his mouth, closing his lips around David's delicious cock, inhaling the pungent, sexy musk of him. David moved his hips, sliding his cock farther into Ben's mouth until the tip of it lodged in his throat. Ben couldn't breathe but didn't care. He stared up with adoration into David's dark blue eyes.

David stared back, as if daring Ben to resist him. Just before Ben knew he'd have to push back to catch his breath, David withdrew, allowing him to take a gasping breath before again pressing his cock deep into Ben's throat. His movements were slow and deliberate. Each time he blocked Ben's windpipe, he stared into his eyes, as if to say, "You belong to me. Even your breath."

Each time he pulled back, Ben held him with his tongue and lips, aware the friction he created was driving his sexy lover wild. After several minutes of the slow tease, David succumbed to Ben's skillful kiss, no longer the one in control. He began to move faster, his head falling back, his breath quickening. Ben reached up, finding David's still lubricated entrance. He pressed in the tip of his finger, drawing a cry of passion from David as he rapidly thrust in and out of Ben's mouth, impaling him with his delicious, hot shaft.

All at once David's body stiffened. In a series of small shudders, he climaxed, his seed shooting down Ben's throat so he barely needed to swallow. As he pulled back, Ben continued to lick and kiss the retreating shaft until it was completely withdrawn. David rolled from his chest, collapsing beside him with a huge sigh of pleasure.

Without speaking, he lay his head on Ben's chest and curled himself against his side. Ben felt a surge of affection overpowering the lust that had been there a moment before. Tenderly he pushed the tangle of hair from David's forehead.

"I love you," he almost whispered. But he didn't say it. Not aloud. Not yet. There was time. Instead he stroked his new lover's strong back, memorizing its curves and bone with his fingers. His eyes felt heavy and he let them close, happiness falling over him like a gossamer net as he slept.

* * * * *

"Thanks, Mary Ann." Carl looked up briefly from his computer screen as his secretary placed a folder on the desk in front of him. A shapely, twenty-something beauty, she was the envy of his male colleagues, none of whom knew he was gay. Mary Ann didn't know it either, unaware when she bent low over his desk, flashing her cleavage along with a sly smile, he was utterly indifferent to her. While he didn't go out of his way to deny it, nor did he advertise his orientation. His private life was his business.

Once Mary Ann had left his office, Carl picked up the slim folder. The tab had a neatly typed label *Anderson, David J.* It wasn't unusual for Carl to request a credit check on individuals who were involved in deals with the firm. As far as Mary Ann was concerned, this was just another routine check.

He opened the folder, noting David's date of birth, social security number, New York driver's license number, current address and credit history. He scanned the pages quickly. There wasn't much to it—the guy obviously had no net worth to speak of. He'd hoped to find something damning—a bankruptcy, judgment or pending lawsuit—but everything looked in order if mundane. He'd had a few late payments on a credit card but Carl doubted this would be enough to taint him in Ben's eyes.

At least he had his address now. He'd have to get his car from the garage and take a drive to Jamaica to see how his rival lived. Meanwhile he'd see what Jeanette knew about the guy. Though his sister and he weren't especially close, she loved to gossip and always seemed to know the dirty details about anyone, if there were any to know.

He swiveled in his large desk chair to face the picture window overlooking the city as he flipped open his cell phone. After preliminary small talk, Carl said casually, "So tell me, what do you know about David Anderson?"

"David? You mean George's best man at the wedding? What do you mean, what do I know about him? Not for nothing, Carl, but I don't think you're his type. He's more of an artsy kind of guy. You know, the theater and all that. Anyway, aren't you still seeing that nice guy Ben?"

Carl bristled, annoyed. "No, I'm not seeing him. That is, we've agreed to see other people." He'd forgotten how nosy his sister could be. And what did she know about "his type"? At the same time, he realized this would be a good angle to take to explain his interest. With a small, forced laugh, he said, "As to types, I guess that would be up to David, don't you think? We had a nice talk at your wedding and he gave me his card. I thought I might give him a call, but I wanted to get your take on him first. You're always such a good judge of character."

Jeanette sounded mollified, even pleased. "Well, I suppose that's true. Let me see. I don't know him all that well. They became friends when George got involved in community theater. David was the director for George's amateur theater group and they just hit it off. George has joked if he were gay, David would be the one for him! I used to get almost jealous when he was off rehearsing because David is so damn good-looking, but I know my Georgie loves only me."

Her voice had risen to a little-girl register as she spoke the last words. Carl winced. He tried to keep his voice pleasant as he probed for information, though he didn't know what he was seeking. As she began to go on at length about George's acting skills, Carl interrupted. "I'm sorry, Jeanette, I've got to take this call. We'll talk again soon. Bye."

That hadn't gone anywhere. If there was any dirt on Anderson, Jeanette didn't seem to know about it. Carl's time was too expensive to waste investigating this guy on his own. He lifted his office phone receiver and pressed the button to connect to his secretary. "Mary Ann, get me Pete Harris on the phone."

"The private investigator?"

"Yes. You can put him right through."

* * * * *

"I really should go back to my place," Ben said, though he made no effort to move. He was lying on David's couch, his head in David's lap.

"Have another one," David said, ignoring him. He took a ripe strawberry from the bowl beside him and dropped it into Ben's open mouth.

When they'd awoken from their sex-induced nap, he'd taken Ben to his favorite local gourmet market. They'd bought fresh fruit, various cheeses, black olives, crusty fresh bread and, for Ben, a bottle of red wine. They'd eaten from the feast at David's

kitchen table, retiring to the couch with the unfinished berries and the half empty bottle of wine.

David kept waiting for Ben to probe more about why he didn't drink. And oddly, for the first time, he felt he might eventually confide the reason. But not yet. They were too new.

"You're spoiling me," Ben said lazily as he licked the strawberry juice from his lips. "I feel like some kind of Greek god lying about on Mount Olympus with the most handsome god of all feeding me fruit and wine."

David smiled. "You know who you look like?" he asked suddenly.

"Who?"

"Owen Wilson. You know, the actor?"

"My nose, you mean," Ben laughed. "Actually you're not the first person to tell me that."

"Your nose, yes. And those full, sexy lips. But your eyes, those amazing eyes—sometimes they're clear green, other times gray. They seem to change with your mood. I swear I could fall into them when you stare at me."

Ben smiled. "You've got a poetic nature, David. I'm not used to being with someone like you. I think I could get used to it in a hurry though." He sat up and turned to face David. "I feel so easy with you. I don't have to watch my every move, question my motives, watch my back."

"Man, it sure sounds like Carl did a number on you. Why did you stay with him so long?" Ben flushed and looked down. "Hey, I'm sorry. I have no right to question you like that. I know things can seem very different when you're actually in a relationship than when you finally get out."

Ben flashed a grateful look at him. "Yeah, I guess that's part of it. Things weren't always bad between us. I'm actually the one who went after him. He was the aloof one, telling me at first he never got involved with anyone from Wall Street. Said he didn't shit where he ate, as I recall."

"I've always hated that expression," David said, making a face.

"Me too. Obviously we did get involved. He was very cool at first, which just spurred me on, I guess. You know, the classic story—you always want the one who plays hard to get."

"Until you get him," David laughed.

Ben sighed. "At first I couldn't get enough of him. I loved to be with him. He was exciting. I mistook his dark, dangerous quality for something sexy, instead of something manipulative and controlling, which eventually it turned out to be. At first I was like an eager puppy at the car window when he'd come around. After keeping me at arm's length for several weeks, when we did finally go out on a real date and then home to fall into bed, the experience was explosive. Even toward the end the sex was always very intense. Even after the arguments. Especially after the arguments, when it

sometimes seemed he used sex as a weapon, as a way of expressing his anger and disguising it as passion." His face clouded.

"Why did you leave?" David asked. "What was the final straw?"

"His fist through a wall, I guess."

"Whoa."

"Yeah. He has anger issues. Obviously." Ben smiled, but his expression was pained. "He's a very possessive guy. At first I liked it. I mean, it made me feel valued, special. Especially because I was the one who went after him to start with. After we made love the first time, he couldn't seem to get enough of me. He called me each morning on the way to work to say hi, and he wanted me to keep Instant Messenger open on my computer so he could check in. Neither of us have time for lunch very often, but we could stay in touch during the day that way. At first it was great. I thought we were falling in love and this was what lovers did – they stayed connected.

"We'd meet for dinner and go back to one of our places, usually his. He said my queen-sized bed was too small—he has a king of course. Looking back now, I think he enjoyed having me in his space—it was one more subtle form of control. But back then I didn't think that way. I loved falling asleep in his arms.

"Sometimes though, I didn't want to see him. I had other things I like to do. I like to play racquetball and I have a Wednesday night poker game. Once we were seriously dating, he'd convince me to skip all that and stay with him. 'What do you want to play cards for when we can be together?' It was the first time I started feeling a little crowded by him. I mean, I was into him and all that, but I didn't want to give up things that were important to me."

"Of course not," David agreed.

"Well, he went with it for a while, but then he started saying things like, 'If you really loved me, you wouldn't want to spend all night away from me playing poker in some smoke-filled basement until all hours of the morning.' I would feel guilty and skip a week or two just to keep him happy."

"Uh-oh," David said.

"Yeah, uh-oh is right. Once I gave up racquetball and my poker games, he wanted more 'proof' of my devotion. He wanted me to move in with him. To just give up my place and move in."

"You'd be crazy to give up that apartment."

"You got that right! It's rent-controlled too. I'd never find anything close to that if we were ever to break up, I'd tell him. That would make him angry. He'd accuse me of planning to break up already and demand to know who I was now seeing. It got to be crazy. I started going to my poker game again, partly to prove to him and maybe even more to myself that I could. That I was still my own man. He actually accused me of having an affair with one of the men. The guy is married, for god's sake!"

"How'd he counter that?" David asked.

"Said it was the perfect front. That he wouldn't be the first married guy to take a gay lover."

"Jeez, you couldn't catch a break, huh?"

"Nope. I think he even followed me toward the end. I never actually caught him doing it, but sometimes the things he would say led me to think he'd been spying on me. It was a very disconcerting feeling. When I called him on it, he'd get so angry I was almost afraid of him."

Ben paused, staring into the middle distance, his brow creasing. "It's ironic, but he pushed me away by trying to keep me so close. He made his own dire prophesy I would be the one to leave him come true. He really left me no choice. I would have suffocated if I'd stayed with him. It got to where he wouldn't let me take a leak without asking me where I was going."

"Did he ever hit you?"

"No. I think he wanted to but, thank god, it never went that far. He did shove me a few times. He'd clench his fists sometimes, as if he could barely control himself. I think the night he hit the wall he wanted to hit me. I guess he didn't dare. I'm at least as strong as he is. It's different than with a woman who weighs a hundred pounds less than you do. He shocked me though, when he smashed the wall. I realized his rage could really get out of control, dangerously out of control. Something in me finally snapped at that point. I knew right then I was done with him."

"Yet you went to the wedding with him..." David said softly, a question in his voice.

"I know." Ben put his head in his hands and then lifted his face, his expression weary. "He wears you down, you know? He comes back, head hanging, so sincere, so earnest. I felt sorry for him. I guess I still fell for his lines about loving me so much the passion sometimes overflowed in inappropriate ways. He hates to go to weddings alone. I'd promised to go months before. He was making friendly overtures and I guess I was relieved he was behaving himself. He wasn't saying let's get back together. He seemed to have accepted it was over between us. Then at the wedding he started in again with the jealousy thing."

"Over me." David couldn't help smiling.

"Yes," Ben said. "Over you."

"Well, I'm not glad he gave you grief, but I am glad I got to be the one to take you home that night." He reached out and stroked Ben's cheek. "And I guess he's out of the picture now. I mean, he's left you alone since the wedding, right? Maybe he's finally reconciled himself to it all. Maybe he's even found a new guy and you're just a dim memory."

"Maybe," Ben said, but he didn't sound convinced.

Chapter Five

"Ben Richman." Ben answered his phone without thinking. He'd been in the middle of typing a sentence at his keyboard and hadn't bothered glancing at the caller ID on his office phone.

"Ben. How are you?" A blade of cold sliced through his gut as he recognized the deep, resonant voice of his ex-lover. In fairness, Carl had left him completely alone in the three weeks since the wedding. He realized he shouldn't let old patterns and habits affect him. Maybe Carl was just calling to say hello. He should at least give him the benefit of the doubt.

"Carl. Hi. I'm fine. A little busy..."

"I won't keep you. I was just wondering if you'd care to join me for a drink or dinner tonight." He hurried on, as if expecting a refusal at any moment. "Not to start anything, don't worry. I know you're seeing that Anderson fellow." *How does he know that?* Ben wondered, but was distracted by Carl's next comment. "Though, you should know, he's not necessarily all he seems to be."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Nothing. Look, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to bring him into this. I just wanted to call and say hello. I've been taking this course. You know, like you suggested. It's a kind of step program, designed to help one learn to handle anger and feelings of helplessness. Did you know a lot of anger stems from that? From feeling helpless and powerless?"

Despite himself, Ben was surprised. Carl had laughed off his suggestion for an anger-management program before, claiming he only became angry because Ben behaved in ways that angered him. It was, as all things had seemed to be in their relationship, ultimately Ben's fault. "You're in an anger-management program?"

"Yes," Carl said softly. "I don't want to make the same mistakes in my next relationship I made with you." As Ben digested this tacit admission he'd made mistakes, Carl continued. "Part of the program involves making amends. I wanted to see you to, well, to apologize for some of my behavior. I'm coming to understand how I might have pushed you away and how I hurt you."

"Carl, I appreciate that. Just saying it now is enough. I don't think we need to—"

"I would like to see you," Carl interrupted. Ben could hear the restrained plea in his tone. In a way it was harder to resist than an out-and-out appeal. "Just a few minutes. We could meet for a drink down in the lobby bar. We wouldn't even have to leave this building. For old time's sake? For the six months we shared? For the love you once felt for me?" Carl's voice cracked and he cleared his throat. Ben felt at once manipulated, guilty and sorry for Carl.

"Okay," he said, against his better instincts. "We could meet for a drink, I guess. I've got about thirty minutes more of work I have to finish up. I could meet you at six-thirty."

"Thank you. I look forward to seeing you."

Carl hung up the phone and snapped the self-help book in his lap shut. Quoting drivel out of it seemed to do the trick. As if he'd waste his time and money signing up for some bullshit touchy-feely class about how to say sorry.

How distant Ben had sounded on the phone! How different from the eager man who had been so painfully obvious in his initial attraction. Carl leaned back, recalling Ben's shy glances at the seminar they'd both attended. He'd been able to see past Carl's straight façade, the one he presented in the work world. He'd managed to get a seat next to Carl when they'd reconvened after lunch. When his thigh "accidentally" touched Carl's and Carl hadn't moved away, he'd known Ben knew he was gay and he'd known as well about Ben.

Carl never pursued men. He always let them come to him and Ben had been no exception. Though he'd meant it when he said it wasn't wise to get involved with people in the workplace, he'd known he'd possess Ben from the moment their thighs touched. He'd enjoyed making Ben wait—ratcheting Ben's desire by resisting him, pretending an indifference he didn't feel. By the time he finally took Ben home to his bed, Ben had been willing to do anything for him.

At first things had been great. Ben had been happy to see him whenever he could spare the time. Carl was very busy, much busier in his high-profile, high-stakes job than Ben, pouring over reports and crunching numbers in some back room. He made Ben understand his work was paramount, and at first their arrangement had worked well. When he wanted to see Ben, Ben was there.

Carl shifted in his chair, dropping his hand to his cock as he remembered those first exciting months. The sex had been hot. Carl enjoyed being in control, and Ben let him do what he wanted. He even seemed to get an almost submissive thrill from allowing Carl to dominate the action, dictating when and how they would have sex. The blowjobs in the bathroom stall had been hot. Carl loved the power rush he felt as he rode the elevator down to meet Ben for the occasional secret rendezvous on the eighth floor. He loved knowing Ben was on his knees waiting to worship his cock. He never returned the favor—that wasn't how it worked between them. He commanded and Ben obeyed.

When was it things had begun to unravel? He realized now, as he endlessly contemplated just what went wrong between them, his mistake had been in giving Ben too much freedom from the beginning. He'd been far too tolerant in allowing him to go out several nights a week without him. The hours supposedly spent playing racquetball, running in the park and at poker night were bad enough. Toward the end, Ben hadn't even wanted to stay the night at his place anymore. He said he had too

much on his mind—he needed *space*. He had probably already started seeing that Anderson asshole, even before he broke it off between them! Carl slammed his fist against the desk.

He took a deep breath and let it out slowly. *Stop it*, he ordered himself. Ben only just met David at the wedding. What had David said to Ben at the table? *It was nice to meet you. Let's connect before you leave*. Of course, that could have been planned for his benefit. Yes! Ben and David could have been secretly seeing one another well before Ben even had the grace to formally break it off with Carl! Oh, he always pretended to be so innocent, but Carl knew the score. Most men were faithless and fickle, their heads turned by the next handsome face, the next promise of cock. Why should Ben have been any different?

Carl clutched the arms of his chair, his knuckles white. Slowly he released his grip, defeat and sorrow coursing through him. “I loved him! No one has ever been more loved.” He spoke quietly into the empty room, his tone anguished. For that was the difference between Ben and all the other lovers he’d left or lost over the years. For the first time he’d realized too late how much he loved Ben. If only he could get the chance to prove it.

He lifted the gray folder with the information the private investigator had provided him. It had been money well spent. The dirt he’d uncovered on David had been far more damning than Carl had expected. Once Ben knew who and what David really was, he’d drop him like a hot potato and come back to Carl’s open arms.

Or...or he would shoot the messenger. It was a gamble. If Carl revealed his information and Ben already knew it, he would accuse Carl of meddling, of snooping, of stalking them! It would only serve to push the wedge even deeper between them. *Shit*. The usually decisive Carl couldn’t decide what to do.

There was the off chance Ben and David were already fizzling. It had been three weeks since the wedding when they supposedly first met. Long enough for the bloom to have faded from the rose.

He’d been prepared for Ben to refuse him or at least put up more resistance to seeing him again. Yet Ben had capitulated almost at once. Was it possible...? Could it be Ben missed him too but had been too proud or too embarrassed to let his feelings be known? Perhaps he’d been waiting for Carl’s call! After all, he had caller ID on his phone at work. He would have recognized Carl’s cell phone number. So he chose to take the call and with only the slightest encouragement, he’d agreed to meet Carl for a drink.

Despite his careful nature, Carl felt hope like a little bird beating its wings in his heart. Maybe he wouldn’t have to say a word about David. Maybe Ben would admit he’d been foolish to walk out on the best thing he’d ever had. Perhaps Ben would be the one to apologize, to ask for another chance!

Carl checked his watch. He smiled, imagining the always prompt Ben waiting impatiently for him down at the bar. People waited for Carl Young, not the other way

around. He retrieved his briefcase and opened it, slipping the gray folder inside before snapping it shut. Walking out of his office, he nodded toward Mary Ann, bent over her keyboard. She looked up with a hopeful smile. "Carl! A few of us are going out for a drink. What do you say?" The poor, deluded girl never gave up.

"Sorry. I have an engagement. Perhaps another time." He strode to the elevator, Mary Ann already forgotten.

* * * * *

Ben glanced at his watch and shook his head. Some things never changed, he supposed. Carl was ten minutes late. When they were first dating and Carl was consistently late, Ben just assumed he lost track of time, but he'd come to conclude by the end of their relationship it was just another way Carl exerted control. He would never be the one left waiting.

As he saw Carl enter the bar, despite himself he felt a clutch of erotic recognition. Whatever else he was, Carl had a certain dark magnetism that still held some kind of residual power over Ben. Though it was definitely over between them, a lingering physical attraction remained.

Carl caught sight of him and a smile lit up his face. That smile reminded Ben things hadn't all been dark and unhappy between them. Their relationship had been complex as relationships often were. It was when the complexity outweighed the pleasure, when he found himself having to explain, to convince, to cajole, to apologize for the real and perceived slights Carl claimed he committed at every turn—that's when the joy had been snuffed out for good. He knew there was no going back.

Still, Carl had assured him he just wanted to say hello. To make amends. Ben realized he was almost looking forward to it—to hear Carl say he was sorry. To have him admit he'd made mistakes, he'd been over-possessive, controlling, even abusive at times... Yet could a leopard really change his spots? A wave of doubt suddenly washed over Ben, but he was here now. He'd see it through.

Carl reached him. Wordlessly he held out his arms, clearly expecting Ben to rise from his chair and step into them. Ben didn't stand, instead gesturing toward the chair across from his at the small table. "Hi, Carl. I thought maybe you weren't coming." He realized as he made the remark he wouldn't have dared do so when they'd been together. He'd have paid for it one way or the other. How wonderful it was to be free of this man! How could he have thought he'd been in love?

Carl eased himself into his chair with a frown. He set his briefcase down beside him on the floor. "Hello, Ben."

Ben gave a little wave toward a nearby waitress, who hurried over with a smile. Ben had already ordered a beer for himself. Though Carl preferred whiskey at home, he ordered his usual when they were out at a bar—a martini. He always winced when he first tasted it, as if he didn't like it. Ben thought he liked the image of himself as the sort

of man who took his drink seriously. Beer, he'd once told Ben, was for auto mechanics and bricklayers.

As they waited for Carl's drink, Ben reached into the bowl of pistachio nuts on the table between them. It was opening night for David's new show with curtain time at eight-thirty. David was superstitious about opening night and didn't want to see Ben until after the show. Otherwise he would have met him for dinner beforehand. He glanced at his watch. "I only have about twenty minutes until I have to get going."

"You have somewhere to be?"

"Yes." He didn't elaborate. Carl didn't have the right to interrogate, not anymore. Where Ben spent his time and with whom was no longer his concern.

Carl seemed about to retort but his drink arrived at that moment. He lifted it and drank deeply before setting the glass down. "I've missed you," he said softly. Ben didn't respond. Carl waited a beat and said, "Not a day has gone by I haven't thought of you, Ben. I know you must miss me too. We had too much together for you to just toss it all away. You see now I'm able to give you all the space you need. Perhaps we could —"

"No," Ben interrupted him. He should have known Carl had no intention of making amends or whatever it was he'd said on the phone. This was just another ploy to test the waters, to lure him back. "Please, Carl. Don't do this again. We've had this discussion too many times. It's over. I'm seeing someone else."

"David Anderson."

"Yes."

Carl finished his drink and signaled for another. With a quiet control Ben recognized as the calm before the storm, he said in a cold voice, "You'd choose that college dropout, that vacuous, empty-headed *model* over me? Has the man ever read a book? Does he even *own* a book?"

"How do you know he's a college dropout?"

Carl waved his hand dismissively. "Everyone knows. Don't forget, I knew him first. Did he tell you *why* he dropped out? Did he?"

Ben felt anger flare, rising like poison from his gut. "This is how you make amends? This is how you apologize? By insulting the man I'm seeing?"

"Apologize! You're the one who should be on his knees, begging me to come back! Instead you've got your head up your ass about that guy, believing all the drivel he feeds you. I can see you don't know why he dropped out. Ask *him*, why don't you. I'm not going to do your dirty work for you."

Carl stood abruptly, leaning down for his briefcase. "Call me when you come to your senses." He turned and walked away just as the waitress brought his second drink to the table, leaving Ben with the bill.

* * * * *

"You really think so?" David beamed with pleasure.

"I know so! Did you hear that applause? When you came out for the second curtain call, the audience gave you a standing ovation! You're really talented, David. When I was watching you up there, I forgot it was you. You *became* the character. It was really something to see." Ben wasn't offering empty praise—the play had been entertaining and well directed, but it was David who really carried the show.

David smiled and reached over to stroke Ben's arm. They were lying together in Ben's bed. It was two o'clock in the morning but David was still wound up with excitement over the successful debut of the new play. "I was nervous about having you in the audience. Your opinion means more to me than any critic's."

Ben smiled in the dark and turned to kiss David's cheek. It was the first time they'd been in bed together without making love, but he knew it was only because they were both so tired. The fact neither felt compelled to have sex was proof, in his mind at least, of how comfortable they were with one another.

He lay quietly, his eyes closing though his mind was still whirring. The meeting with Carl seemed so long ago, though it was only that evening. He'd had to rush to make it to the theater in time. He'd been so absorbed by the play he hadn't had a chance to think about what Carl said. After the play, David invited him to the opening-night cast party. David had been surrounded, the toast of the party, and there hadn't been much chance to talk.

Carl's words came back to him now. *I can see you don't know why he dropped out. Ask him, why don't you?* He recalled David told him he'd dropped out of college after a semester. He'd been vague as to why and at the time Ben thought nothing more about it. He wasn't of the opinion one had to have a college degree to be fulfilled or successful. Clearly David was making his way in the world without that piece of parchment, so what difference did it make?

Yet Carl's words unsettled him. Carl wasn't one to throw out idle threats. He obviously knew something he considered damning about David, though why he hadn't come out with it at the time was also something of a mystery. *I won't do your dirty work for you.* Was that what he had said?

David was on his side, facing Ben, his arm flung lightly across Ben's waist. His breathing was deep and regular and Ben realized he was asleep. Though he was exhausted, his mind wouldn't shut down, troubled with questions and insinuations Carl had put there.

It was unsettling, to say the least, to find out Carl had been snooping around about his new lover. Clearly, though he'd left Ben alone since the wedding, he wasn't yet over the breakup. Did he really think digging up dirt on David was a way to win him back?

Whatever Carl had hoped to accomplish, Ben found himself wondering what secrets David was keeping from him. Niggling seeds of doubt had wormed their way into his brain, planted by his ex-lover, as no doubt was the intent.

What was the worst that could have happened? Drugs? Caught cheating on an exam? It wasn't as if he'd killed someone, for god's sake! Ben turned on his side, his back toward the sleeping David. This was silly. He wouldn't let Carl's words get between them. He'd simply ask David in the morning and that would be that.

* * * * *

David awoke with a feeling of wellbeing, though for a moment he couldn't recall why. Then the night before came back to him—the successful opening, the accolades from his peers and friends, and most of all, having Ben there to share it with.

He realized he was falling in love with Ben. Neither of them had yet said those three fateful words, but he was pretty sure Ben was feeling the same way. He knew they were still in the first flush of new love—things might feel very different six months from now. But at the moment he felt happy and grateful for the man still lying asleep next to him. He glanced at the clock. It was only eight-thirty, but he felt refreshed and ready to get up. He would make coffee and slip out to buy fresh croissants and fruit for their breakfast.

When he returned from a successful outing at the nearby market, Ben was sitting at the kitchen table, drinking coffee and reading the paper. "I was hoping you hadn't left without telling me!" he said.

"I took your keys," David said. "I didn't want to wake you. Look what I got." He opened the white paper bag, taking out the still-warm fragrant rolls and a container of ripe, luscious raspberries.

"I really should give you your own key," Ben said. "I have an extra key to the building. Remind me, I'll get it later. That way you could crash here during the day if you ever needed to while you're doing modeling gigs or rehearsals or whatever."

David smiled broadly. Though he often stayed at Ben's during the week and Ben had stayed with him on the weekends when he wasn't in a show, neither had talked about moving in together. He'd taken to packing an overnight bag in case they got together during the week, but he hadn't wanted to put any pressure on Ben. Not that he wanted to move in with someone, no thank you! David valued his independence far too much to consider it.

"Thanks, that would be great. I'll give you a key too, though I doubt you'll find yourself in Queens with time on your hands," he laughed.

"Hey, you never know," Ben answered.

They shared their breakfast in companionable silence. Over their second cup of coffee, Ben said casually, "You said you went to Hunter College for a while, right?"

"Yeah. Why?"

"Oh, no real reason. You mentioned you just went one semester. What happened to make you drop out?"

David glanced sidelong at Ben. What did he know? Was he just casually asking or was there more to it? He looked into Ben's face, searching for the answer there. Things were going so well between them. It had happened so long ago. He'd paid his debt to society. Did he really want to take the chance of ruining what they shared? On the other hand, wouldn't it just bring them closer? If he were to confide his deepest secrets, Ben would know he was serious about their relationship.

Ben was watching him, his eyes narrowing slightly as he waited. David felt fear grip his gut. What if it didn't bring them closer? What if Ben were unable to deal with it? Unable to accept it had been a tragic accident? Would he wonder too why David hadn't volunteered information about such a life-changing event on his own? Would he question David's sincerity about other aspects of their relationship?

David took a breath. Did he take a leap of faith and trust Ben would understand? He felt as if he were poised on the edge of a diving board over a pool of water that might not be deep enough to receive him.

He hesitated, his courage failing him. With as much nonchalance as he could muster, he replied, "Oh, nothing much. You know, I was immature, not ready for the rigors of academia. Then I started getting modeling jobs and I just never looked back, I guess."

Ben didn't answer, his eyes roaming over David's face until he felt his cheeks warm. He turned away, regretting his cowardice, wondering what Ben really knew.

Chapter Six

"That's odd." Ben could have sworn he'd dropped his extra building key into the box the night Carl had reluctantly returned it. He picked up the box and emptied its contents on the hall table. Mixed among letters and papers he meant to file were several other keys of various sizes and shapes, some of which he no longer recalled their use, but no building key.

"What's odd?" David asked. He hoisted his duffel bag over his shoulder, ready to leave.

"I wanted to give you my spare building key, but it isn't where I thought it was. They're those special 'do not duplicate' keys the hardware stores won't touch. I'll have to see if I can get another one from the landlord."

"You probably just put it someplace else. I'm sure you'll find it."

"I wanted to give it to you today."

"I'm sure it'll turn up." He leaned toward Ben and kissed him lightly on the cheek. Though they were both behaving as if nothing had happened, David felt a chill between them. He'd told his first lie to Ben, and though Ben didn't know it, it was a doozy.

He wanted to set it right—to admit the truth about the events of so long ago, but he found he didn't have the courage. What if Ben didn't understand? What if he decided to end things? David realized he wouldn't be able to bear that. He would tell Ben eventually—he *would*. Just not yet. Not until things were a little more solid, a little more certain between them.

Meanwhile he needed to leave—to give space to both Ben and himself. He couldn't help but wonder what had prompted Ben's sudden question, but because he wanted to avoid the topic altogether, he hadn't probed. Instead they'd finished breakfast in what was, for David, a painful silence. When Ben asked if he wanted to shower together before they started their day, he'd said no, probably too quickly, adding he had lots of errands to do today. He was appearing in the play again tonight, but they hadn't discussed if he should return to Ben's much-closer apartment or make the trek back to Queens. David realized he wasn't sure what he wanted to do. He hoped the decision would sort itself out by then.

"I'll call you later," he said.

"Okay," Ben said. "Are you coming back after the play?"

"Uh, I'm not sure yet. Can I let you know later?" He knew his behavior must seem strange to Ben but he couldn't help it. He had to get away from Ben's soulful eyes and the gentle sadness he thought he saw in them. He needed time to think.

"Sure," Ben answered, turning away.

* * * * *

Ben sank into a chair. Something had happened at breakfast, but he wasn't sure what. David had answered his question about dropping out of school with a perfectly plausible explanation, but for the first time in their brief but intense relationship, Ben felt something wasn't quite right. It was as if the world had clicked over, like the bits of colored glass in a kaleidoscope, altering his view of things. It was decidedly unsettling.

Would he have noticed David's hesitation in answering if Carl hadn't put the bug in his ear? What did Carl know he wasn't telling? If David had lied, why had he done so?

Ben's heart felt heavy. Seedlings of doubt planted by Carl had been watered by David's response and his quick departure. Was this the beginning of the end?

Ben had offered the spare building key not only because he wanted David to have somewhere to crash when he was between gigs in Manhattan but as a gesture of faith. Though he suspected David was being less than forthcoming about his past, he'd wanted to say, "I trust you. Giving you this key is proof."

Odd the key was missing. Was the fact he couldn't find it symbolic? Indicative that the basis of trust wasn't yet there between them? *No, you idiot. It's just indicative of its being missing.* Ben grinned to himself and stood. He wasn't going to let this ruin his day. He had a lot of things to do as he always did at the end of the work week. Though he would have enjoyed spending time with David, it would be good to be apart for a while as well. It would give him time to process what the morning had meant and where to go from here.

* * * * *

Carl sat in his office, the work he'd planned to catch up on that Saturday morning forgotten. He was idly drumming his fingers against the desktop as he stared into the middle distance. Last night had not gone according to plan.

He realized now he had deluded himself into thinking Ben had missed him and might want to reconcile. Ben's cold declaration he was seeing someone else—it was over between them—had stabbed him to the bone.

So why hadn't he just come out and told Ben about David? Ben no longer loved him. Why should he be shielded from the harsh truth about the man he thought he knew? He realized he hadn't told Ben because of experience regarding being the bearer of bad news. The old adage of shooting the messenger held some validity. Ben would find a way to turn it on Carl. He would cling to the slick, handsome younger man, his faults obscured by the size of his cock and the chiseled perfection of his jaw.

Carl sat very still for a long while. He knew he should cut his losses and let Ben go. Admit defeat and move on. He would be more careful next time. He would seek out a more pliable man—one eager to bend to his will, one who would appreciate his innate

right to be the dominant force in their relationship. He was probably well rid of the flippant, over-independent Ben.

Carl opened his briefcase and reached behind the hidden panel in the lid. He extracted a slim DVD case, running his fingers over the plastic as he closed his eyes. He'd taken risks with Ben, stupid risks really, but he didn't regret it. The thrill of their clandestine meetings on the eighth-floor bathroom of their office building still lingered with a half-life of desire in his mind. Ben had had such potential as his ideal lover but that had fizzled out over time.

Images crowded into his mind as he remembered the secret rendezvous. There was Ben, kneeling so obediently in the bathroom stall, his mouth open like a baby bird's, ready to worship Carl's cock. He'd first called him as a test, to see how far his new lover would go for him. He recalled the first time...

"Ben."

"Carl?"

"Yes. Meet me in the men's room on the eighth floor in ten minutes. I'll expect to find you there on your knees in one of the stalls." He didn't ask, he didn't explain—he simply commanded. He didn't give Ben a chance to ask questions, to agree or to refuse, he simply hung up and waited, his cock swelling with anticipation.

When twelve minutes had passed, he took the elevator down to the eighth floor, the bathroom key clutched in his hand. A major tenant had recently vacated the floor, leaving it nearly empty, so the odds of another employee entering the bathroom while they were there was slim but not impossible. He realized Ben might not be there. He might have pushed him a little too far with his demand.

But Ben had been there, waiting as ordered, kneeling on the tiled floor. He'd started to rise, but a hand on his shoulder had been enough. Back then just a look had been enough. Carl sighed heavily and closed his eyes, slipping back to the recollection once more.

He unbuckled his belt and opened his pants, pulling down his underwear only enough for his cock to be worshipped by the man kneeling in front of him. The situation so aroused him it didn't take long for him to shoot his load down Ben's willing throat. Still without speaking, he put himself back together, patted Ben's head and left the bathroom.

That night the sex was combustible. Clearly Ben had been as turned on as he was. They'd repeated the scenario many times after, though toward the end Ben had begun to refuse—just one of many clues things were headed downhill between them.

Ben didn't know Carl had secretly videotaped several of the sessions, having placed a hidden digital video camera in the stall the mornings of their secret meetings. Though at first he had eventually planned to, he never did show Ben the tapes. Things began to deteriorate in the last few months and the time never seemed right. Ben had started getting so uppity and demanding—he probably wouldn't take the secret videotaping in

the spirit it had been intended—something sexy to watch together in the privacy of their bedroom.

As things went from bad to worse, Carl decided to keep the tapes secret. He transferred them to a DVD, which he kept discreetly in his night table. He watched it from time to time. He enjoyed the fantasy of Ben on his knees like some two-bit male prostitute, a stranger's cock shoved down his throat—for the camera captured Carl only from the waist down.

Even early on in their relationship he'd known, though he'd denied it to himself for as long as he could, Ben would leave him eventually, abandoning him for someone new. And he had, hadn't he? He'd gone to the wedding with Carl, leading him on regarding a possible reconciliation, and left with someone else.

Well, two could play at that game. If Ben wanted to fight dirty, it could definitely be arranged. With a grim smile, he patted the DVD in his hand.

If he couldn't have Ben, nobody would.

* * * * *

David woke to the sound of something falling through the mail slot of his apartment door. He lay half asleep a moment, wondering why the mail had arrived so early. Then he recalled it was Sunday and he sat up.

Peering through the dancing, lemony light of his bright apartment, he saw a slim brown package lying on the floor. At once his thoughts turned guiltily to Ben. He'd called just before the curtain went up at the theater the night before, making up something about being so busy he hadn't been able to call until then and suggesting they wait until the following afternoon to meet since he'd be out well past midnight due to the play and wouldn't want to disturb Ben at such a late hour.

Now he climbed down from the loft and hurried to the door. He pulled it open, half expecting to see Ben standing before him, that big, slightly lopsided smile on his face, two cups of hot coffee in his hands. Instead he saw no one. Cars were passing along the street, but it was impossible to know if the driver of one of them had just been at his door.

He stepped back inside and picked up the small package, curious. There was no writing on it. No stamps, no address, nothing. It appeared to contain a slim book or DVD. He pulled open the package and saw it was indeed a DVD, unmarked in a clear case. Who did he know who would do something like this? It didn't seem like Ben's sort of thing. He wasn't secretive or furtive. He thought through a list of friends in his mind, coming up with no one who would clandestinely deliver an unmarked package.

He slipped the DVD into the player and turned on the TV. He pushed play and sat down to watch. On the screen there appeared what seemed to be an empty bathroom stall. He could see the edge of the toilet filling part of the screen. He heard a scuffling sound and then saw someone come into view. He could only see his lower back and legs until the person knelt on the ground in front of the toilet.

It was Ben! He was wearing well-tailored dark pants, a white shirt and a tie, though no jacket. What the hell was he doing on the floor in a bathroom stall? And who was recording it?

The picture jumped a little as if it had been cut. A moment later someone else entered the stall. Again he could only see his back. The person shifted his position until he was standing in front of Ben. The camera caught them both from a side view. He watched in horrified, confused fascination as the unidentified stranger opened his pants, his erect cock appearing.

Ben closed his eyes and leaned forward, his lips parted. Despite himself David felt vaguely aroused by the display, but as it went on, he became increasingly upset. When the man began to thrust his hips, his fingers gripping Ben's hair, David clicked the stop button on his remote. He'd seen enough.

He sat stunned for several moments before his mind switched back on. David couldn't reconcile what he'd seen with what he thought he knew. The Ben kneeling on the floor had nothing in common with the sweet, sunny man he was falling in love with. Why would Ben put himself in such a position?

More importantly, why had he sent him this strange, creepy porn movie of himself? Was he trying to tell David something now? Something he didn't dare tell him face-to-face?

A thought began to make its way into his head—perhaps it wasn't Ben who had delivered this DVD. Perhaps it was the person who had videotaped the sordid scenario. But who would do such a thing? And why? Did Ben know he'd been recorded? He wanted to call him right away—to ask for, to demand an explanation.

Yet he held back. They'd parted with him keeping secrets of his own—secrets far worse than a sleazy video. What was the old movie called—*Sex, Lies and Videotape*? David put his head in his hands and sighed. Was this how things would end—when they'd only just begun?

* * * * *

Ben came fully awake all at once, sitting upright in his bed. He looked at his clock—nine-fifteen. He'd been dreaming of David. They were sitting together in a café somewhere by an ocean, their heads leaning close as they spoke. There was an easy intimacy between them in the dream they'd lost in real life the day before.

He realized he had to see David as soon as possible. The distance building between them seemed to widen with each passing moment. It was becoming increasingly clear David was keeping something from him.

Last night had been very lonely. David had said it was silly for him to attend the show a second time, though Ben wouldn't have minded. David also declined the offer to come stay at his SoHo apartment afterward instead of making the trip back to Queens late at night. He'd been vague, saying something about errands and not wanting to bother Ben, speaking hurriedly because the play was about to start and he

needed to get ready. Ben hadn't pressed him. Of course David wasn't required to spend every night with him. That was one of the things that had grated so about Carl—the expectation they would spend every spare moment together. It had become suffocating. He certainly didn't want to do that to David!

If his begging off seeing Ben the rest of the day had happened before the events of that morning, Ben wouldn't have thought too much about it. But knowing David was evading something—avoiding him to steer clear of a possible confrontation—that wasn't healthy for either of them. He cared too much for David to let this come between them, whatever it was.

With resolve, Ben got out of bed and picked up the phone on his way to the kitchen. As he poured a glass of orange juice, he waited to connect. The answering machine picked up instead and he was just about to leave a message when David, slightly breathless, came on the line. "Ben?"

"Hi, David. Sorry if I'm calling too early."

"No, it's okay. I've been up for a while."

There was a moment's silence, and then they said in unison, "Listen, we have to talk."

* * * * *

Ben had been planning what he'd say the whole way out to David's place. He would be gentle and reassuring, promising David he would understand, no matter what had happened all those years ago.

He stopped at the open fruit market just outside the subway station near David's apartment and bought a bag of plump, fragrant nectarines before making his way down the block and up the stairs of David's garage apartment. Just as he reached for the old-fashioned doorbell in the center of the door, David opened it.

Ben felt a moment's shyness. He held out the bag of nectarines and said, "For you." David smiled and took the bag, peering inside as he stepped back for Ben to come in.

"I love nectarines," David said. "Thank you." He took the fruit into the kitchen area, putting it in a bright blue ceramic colander and placing it in the sink for a rinse. They hadn't embraced, they hadn't kissed. It felt as if they were doing a careful dance around one another. Ben accepted a nectarine, biting absentmindedly into it as David lowered the drop-leaf table from the wall and gestured for him to sit.

He would wait for what seemed a suitable opening and then ask David directly what he was keeping from him. He was prepared for more small talk. He wasn't prepared for what David said next.

"Ben, someone dropped something through my mail slot this morning. Something very strange. A DVD. Of you."

"Of me!"

"Yes. I was hoping maybe you could clue me in on what's going on. I have to say I was kind of shocked by the whole thing. I thought we were growing so close, and now I don't know what to think."

Ben stared at David, utterly confused. He wasn't aware of any DVD in which he played a part. "I honestly have no idea what you're talking about. Are you sure it's me? What's on it? Who dropped it off?"

"Yes, it's you. I'm sure of that. At first I thought you must have dropped it by, which confused me even more. But as I watched it, I realized someone else probably did. Someone who wants to see you hurt."

Ben felt a chill. He put the half-eaten nectarine on the plate David had set before him and hugged himself. In a tight voice he asked, "Just what is on this DVD?"

"I guess the best way is just to show you," David replied. He moved toward the couch, retrieving the remote from the end table before sitting down. Ben came to join him, a sick feeling in the pit of his stomach.

They watched as the bathroom stall came into view. It took Ben a second to place the location, and when he did, he couldn't help the gasp. As he saw himself enter and kneel, he murmured, "My god." When Carl entered, of course it was Carl, Ben half stood from the couch, his fists clenching at his sides. "He videotaped it! The bastard videotaped it! He could ruin my career!"

Blindly he raced toward the DVD player, pressing the eject button over and over. The little door opened and he pulled the offending disk from it, hurling it to the ground. His heart was pounding in his chest, adrenaline zinging through his blood until he thought he might faint from it.

"Hey," David said, "hey, calm down. Let's talk this through. Sit down." He patted the sofa next to him. Ben stared at him, for a moment barely registering he was there. If Carl had given this to David, god only knew who else was going to get it. He could just as easily have delivered it to Ben's boss's house. Ben sank against the sofa, closing his eyes as he groaned.

David tried to soothe him. "Ben, don't worry. This is the twenty-first century. Even if Carl does share this with someone else, what you did isn't a crime. A little kinky, yeah, but not illegal."

"Yeah, well, we did it in the building where we're both employed. I was on company time, blowing some creep in a bathroom stall. I'm sure my boss will be just fine and dandy with it. Her first thought will be it isn't a crime."

"How did it happen, Ben? What would make you do something like that? It doesn't seem like the Ben I know. I kind of freaked out watching it, I have to tell you. It's like you have this whole secret identity I don't know about. You never said anything about it to me and we talked a lot about you and Carl."

"I know. I was kind of embarrassed about it, if you want to know. I mean, it *was* kinky. But it was sexy too. Carl has this way about him. He has this dark, dangerous edge that can be thrilling. He'd call me and just say, 'Be there in ten minutes, on your

knees,' in that deep, sexy voice of his. It was a game, no more than that, but a hot one. At least to me at the time. Toward the end, I didn't want to do it anymore because I guess I had fallen out of love, though I wasn't ready to admit that right away, not to him or to myself. What had started as a kinky bit of fun had become just one more way he had to exert his will over me. I didn't want to play anymore, and I stopped showing up when he ordered me to."

"And the camera?"

"I never knew there was a camera! He must have rigged it up beforehand. Jesus! I wonder if he secretly videotapes all his lovers as a backup for blackmail in case things don't go his way." Ben put his face in his hands, a dull ache sliding its way into his head.

"What am I going to do, David? He's going to ruin me."

"No, don't say that. And don't worry. He probably thought he was going to drive a wedge between us by giving me the DVD. I'd realize what a sick puppy you were and call it quits."

Ben looked up. "And do you think that? That I'm a sick puppy?" He tried to smile but failed.

Relief flooded through him as David gently took his hand and kissed the palm. He smiled at Ben and said, "Nah. I admit I was shocked when I realized what and who I was watching, but now that I've had time to think about it, it *is* kind of a sexy scene. My lover on his knees in some public place, my cock in his mouth and any second someone could come in and catch us in the act... It's a sexy fantasy, or it could be in the right circumstance." His countenance darkened as he added, "But the thought of him secretly taping you is horrible. He violated your trust. What *he* did was the crime! We won't let him get away with it, and we won't let him do you any damage."

David spoke with such conviction Ben almost believed him. But then, David didn't know Carl.

Chapter Seven

Partially to distract his lover and partially because it was true, David said, "I think I'm going to die if I don't kiss you." Ben turned toward him, the worry lines between his eyes easing as he smiled.

"Me too," he said softly. Of one accord they stood, moving into one another's arms. It felt so good to touch Ben, to hold him, to lean his cheek against his neck and breathe the essence of him. They kissed for a long moment, hands roaming over hard bodies pressed close from lips to thigh.

David wanted to say he was sorry for pushing Ben away the day before, for hiding from him to avoid confronting difficult issues. He said nothing however, instead focusing on the flick of Ben's tongue against his own.

When at last they separated, Ben said breathlessly, "The loft?" David could see the outline of his hard cock straining against denim. He nodded, his own erection mirroring Ben's. They stripped at the foot of the ladder, their clothing falling together in a jumble. Nimbly David climbed up. In another moment Ben tumbled over him, catching him in a tight embrace. His kiss was passionate, urgent.

David sensed Ben's need to submerge himself, at least for the moment, staving off the possible implications of the damning DVD. He was seeking solace in David's arms, hoping to blot out the world for a while longer. If David could give him that, he would. "Lie down on your back," he said gruffly. "I want to taste your hot cock."

Ben obeyed, his long, thick shaft snaking up his belly. Greedily David pounced upon it, taking it for a moment all the way before easing back to begin a slow, delicious torture. He licked in lazy circles round the shaft, his fingers stroking the soft, warm balls beneath it. All at once he plunged down again, suckling and milking Ben until he felt him begin to writhe and jerk against him. With calculated sensual cruelty he pulled back again, leaving Ben to gasp, "Don't stop, I'm so close! Please..."

But David only smiled, a lazy, slow smile, gliding his tongue over his upper lip. "I don't want you to come, Ben. Not yet. I want to keep you on the edge for as long as possible. I'm going to do it again, but you're not allowed to come. Understand?"

Ben nodded, his eyes bright with lust. Again David knelt over him, teasing and goading his cock with his tongue until Ben arched up, silently begging him to take it all. Finally David complied, moving down until the head hit the back of his throat. He worked the shaft with his throat muscles and tongue until Ben was again thrusting against him. "Oh god! I can't help it this time, David. Oh!"

David abruptly withdrew yet again. Ben sagged against the bed. His face and neck were flushed, his chest rising and falling with shallow breaths. His cock, glistening with David's kisses, bobbed woefully against his belly.

David closed his lips a third time over the iron-hard shaft. Almost immediately Ben began to buck and arch against him, calling his name in a litany of uncontrolled lust. This time David permitted his lover to arc over the edge of orgasm. Over and over Ben jerked against him, releasing gobbets of his seed. David held him deep in his throat until every last tremor subsided. Only then did he pull away, sitting back on his haunches to stare down at the disheveled, sexy man.

"Take me," Ben implored. "Fuck me."

In seconds David was sheathed and lubricated, eager to penetrate his lover. Gently he pushed Ben to his side. He slipped one arm beneath him to pull him closer. With the other hand he guided his cock to Ben's rear entrance. Lightly he pressed against it, gauging Ben's readiness. Ben pressed back against him, eager for his cock.

As David forced the head into the tight, hot tunnel, he forgot his primary purpose was to help Ben forget his troubles. Pleasure hurtled through his loins as he gripped Ben's hip, holding him close as he penetrated deeper. A tight glove of pure sensation massaged his cock. He tried to remain still, savoring the clench of muscle. After a moment though, his body began its own dance, a sensual, thrusting rhythm he could not control.

Ben pushed back against him, causing David's cock to slide all the way in until their balls were touching. David swiveled and bucked against Ben's sexy ass. He leaned forward to kiss his neck, but the urge to bite was almost overwhelming. The primal impulse to claim Ben, to dominate for that moment superseded any tender feelings he might have had.

Gripping his strong shoulder, David gave in to his primitive urge, teasing the supple flesh where neck met shoulder with a nudge of his teeth. Ben gasped as he bit harder, not breaking skin, but hard enough for Ben to feel it. Savagely he pummeled Ben's ass as he licked, bit and kissed his neck and shoulder.

"Jesus," Ben gasped. "You're so hot. So hot...ah...yes..." David was dimly aware Ben was stroking his own cock, rising despite his intense orgasm of a few moments before. David tried to keep his eyes open, entranced with Ben's sexy display, his hand flying over his shaft, which grew harder by the second.

The hot grip of his ass, however, distracted David to such a degree he gave up trying to watch over Ben's shoulder, giving in to his own carnal pleasure. Together they rode a cascade of roiling, tumbling, heated sensation, each lost in his own pleasure, though each aware that pleasure derived primarily from being with the other.

David's orgasm caught him unaware, blasting through his body like a rocket. He clutched Ben, holding on as if he might fly away into space, losing his grip on the world, on himself, if he didn't hold tightly to his lover. If only he could stay in this moment forever, lost in a sexual frenzy, never having to face the future, the questions, the repercussions of an imperfect world.

* * * * *

Rested, showered, with fresh coffee and the nectarines Ben had brought sliced and set out before them, the two men sat at David's small kitchen table. The sex they'd shared had been more passionate, more exultant and somehow more desperate than any they'd shared in their weeks together.

David knew, and sensed Ben knew as well, the intensity they'd experienced was partially a result of the difficulties they now faced. Ben had the very real threat of Carl's potential blackmail while David's secret hung like a black pall between them. Though distracted by the DVD, David knew it was only a matter of time before Ben returned to the unspoken issue.

He didn't expect Ben's next words. "I saw Carl on Friday night."

"You did? But you were with me. Watching the opening and then at the party after that."

"I saw him earlier, just after work. He called me. Said he'd been working through a lot of things. Claimed he'd attended an anger-management course and just wanted to see me to apologize for some of the things he'd done when we were together. Like an idiot, I believed him. I thought maybe it would give him some sort of closure so he could get on with his life and leave me out of it for good."

David felt a curious stab of jealousy. He knew it was irrational. After all, the DVD Carl had dropped like a time bomb into his home could hardly make Ben want to go back to him. "So what happened?" he asked.

"It was just a ruse. I don't think he attended any course or anything like that. He just wanted to feel me out. Carl is the kind of man who can't take no for answer. He's so sure he's right and so sure what he wants is what is best for all concerned, he can't understand when things don't go his way. I think he actually had this idea I just needed some time and would come around. When he saw it wasn't going his way, he got ugly."

"What did he do? If he touched you I'll—" David realized he was clenching his fists. He forced himself to relax and gave a wan smile. "I'm sorry. I'm being ridiculous. Obviously you can take care of yourself."

Ben smiled back. "No, it's sweet. I appreciate your impulse to want to protect me." Ben looked down into his coffee cup and back up at David. "Here's the thing, David. He said something. About you. He's been snooping into your life, or so I gathered. He made dark, ominous remarks. Something to do with your semester of college and why you dropped out."

David felt his stomach heave. The room seemed to tilt and he took a deep breath. He'd planned to tell Ben. But in his own time, in his own way. Now it seemed if he didn't, Carl would do it for him. In fact, he was surprised he hadn't already. Though, he thought suddenly, perhaps he had. "What did he tell you? What does he know?"

"He didn't tell me. That's the thing, David. He said I could do my own dirty work. He left abruptly after that. I haven't heard from him since." Ben's voice became gentle. He put a hand on David's forearm. "Whatever it is, you can tell me, David. You can trust me. Surely you know that."

David stared at Ben, whose expression was earnest, even eager. He thought he wanted to know David's secret. He thought he could handle whatever David hurled his way. Yet David knew better. What he'd done was unforgivable. Though he rarely thought about it consciously anymore, it was always there beneath the surface, that defining moment when his life had been altered forever, when innocence had come to a tragic end.

"I was going to tell you," he said finally. "I wanted to wait. To wait until we were..." He paused. He wanted to say until they were in love. He realized with a searing pain he was in fact in love with Ben. Utterly, foolishly, head over heels in love with a man who would now reject him out of hand once he knew.

With other guys it hadn't really mattered. He had avoided telling them, but he hadn't cared because love wasn't involved. He enjoyed their company but invariably each relationship had ended either with a bang or a whimper but without much regret. Now the one man who had managed to slip past the bulwarks he'd erected around his heart thought he wanted to know the truth.

"It's okay," Ben said softly, his eyes filled with concern. "I can see this is very hard for you. Want to take a walk? Would it be easier to talk that way?"

"No, no. But let's go sit in the living room. I might be able to say it better if I don't have to face you."

Together they walked the few feet toward the couch. Ben sank back into the cushions but David remained taut, poised on the edge as if he might flee. Ben touched his thigh and said softly, "Relax. This isn't an inquisition. You aren't on trial." David glanced sharply at him. Did he know more than he let on? Ben's face was open, his expression without guile. No, he didn't know. For one last moment, he remained blissfully ignorant.

"Before I tell you, for what it's worth, I think I'm in love with you. I don't expect you to say it back. I just wanted you to know."

"It's worth a lot," Ben said softly. "And I feel the same way about you." They smiled at one another for a moment. David felt hope curling at the edges of his despair. He took a deep breath and prepared himself to speak aloud things he'd barely let himself think about.

"It was a long time ago." Images flashed through his mind—the rain splattering against the windshield, backlit by the streetlights, his hands gripping the steering wheel as if he might break it, the boy next to him gesturing wildly, his face animated. He could still hear the sound of the rain pattering against the roof, the swish of the wipers against the glass, James' voice rising, though the thread of the conversation had been long buried beneath the grief.

Ben was looking at him expectantly. David tried again. "I was eighteen. I'd had too much to drink. It was raining. I got behind the wheel." All these things were true, yet they conveyed nothing. Nothing of why he'd been drinking, what had compelled him to get into that car, to risk his life and the life of his friend. How did one convey the

depth of the terror, the agony of the loss, the endless guilt that could never be expunged, no matter the punishment endured...

He felt the stinging in his throat begin to move up behind his eyes. *This isn't fair!* A voice in his head fairly shouted the words. This was the first time since...well, since forever, it seemed, that he'd found himself falling in love. Not just a sexual attraction, but real love, pushing up from the dirt of his dark past like roots about to burst into the sunlight, ready at last to face the light, to bloom, to grow. Would he dash it now, let the dark truth snatch away his chance at happiness?

Ben's expression was kind. He knew Ben would want to understand, would try to be there for him, but how could one expect to be forgiven for the unforgivable? It could wait. It would have to wait. He couldn't bear to lose what they'd had for so short a time.

He tried again, aware he owed Ben some kind of explanation. "I was eighteen," he began again. His tongue seemed to thicken in his mouth, refusing to form the words. He took a shuddery breath as a feeling of nausea swept through his gut.

"Hey," Ben said softly. "You okay?" Gently he touched David's arm. David looked down at his hand, the fingers long and slender, their touch warm and comforting on his skin.

"I can't do this." He looked up beseechingly. "I'm sorry. I want to tell you. I can't. It was a long time ago. An accident. I don't think about it much now. I hope you understand I'm just not ready to share it. I will. I promise. Just not yet." The plea was clear in his voice.

Ben patted his arm and withdrew his hand. His face seemed to close as he looked away, but not before David saw the flash of pain move over it. "I understand," Ben said, his voice soft, the hurt in it nearly concealed.

* * * * *

Ben drummed nervously on the briefcase perched on his lap. He'd gone back and forth over whether or not he should call Carl, demand an explanation for the illicit taping and insist on knowing what further damage he intended to cause. In the end David and he agreed it would do no good. He wouldn't give Carl the satisfaction of groveling. Carl was going to do or had already done whatever he had planned from the beginning. For all Ben knew, his boss was waiting at the office with a proverbial pink slip in her hand.

Though he had a plan, Ben continued to obsess about the DVD. David had said it wasn't a crime to have oral sex in a bathroom stall, as long as no one was disturbed by it. But the stall had been in Ben's office building! They'd met there on company time!

David had tried to calm his fears in this regard as well, pointing out one bathroom stall looked much like the next—who was to say the stall was located in his building? And even if it were, how could it be established the tryst had occurred during the workday? They'd discussed the situation and potential ramifications from every angle.

Ben had forced himself to stop, aware it wasn't fair to David to worry the thing to death.

David.

David with the dark secret he wasn't yet ready to share. Obviously it had to do with a tragic car accident. He'd mentioned being drunk and getting behind the wheel. Perhaps he'd caused someone to be terribly hurt or worse...killed. Imagine carrying that tragedy inside oneself all those years, keeping it dark and festering in a secret place. *I don't think about it much now*, he had said, and perhaps that was true. But it was clear by the pain etched in his face and his eyes whatever had happened was never too far from his consciousness. Whether or not he admitted it, to Ben or to himself, whatever had happened back then continued to color and shape David's life, perhaps in ways even he wasn't aware.

He smiled as he recalled David's words. *Before I tell you, for what it's worth, I think I'm in love with you.* He knew he loved David in return, though their love was strained now by David's fears. True love couldn't flourish when secrets remained between lovers. That didn't mean they had to share every aspect, every detail of their lives to that point. But clearly this secret of David's, one Carl had felt compelled to discover and threaten to reveal, was too big to be swept back under the carpet.

Ben had considered for a moment asking Carl to divulge what he knew. As soon as he thought it, he brushed the thought away. If Carl had uncovered the secret, it must be a matter of public record, which probably meant an arrest and possible criminal record. Ben could seek out the information just as Carl had. Yet this too he knew he would not do.

He would wait for David. A love as new as theirs needed nurturing. David had been there for him with this DVD bullshit. He would be there for David as well, steadfast and patient. He would strive to create a safe place where David might one day feel ready to share what had happened to him one rainy night so long ago. When he was ready, Ben would be waiting with his arms and his heart open.

As the train drew into his station, Ben stood, his posture erect, his bearing resolute, the knowledge of David's support giving him courage. He knew what he had to do.

* * * * *

"Morning, Ben. Janet needs to see you right away. Urgent, she said." Martha, the receptionist, smiled up at Ben from her stool behind a circular counter that faced the bank of elevators on Ben's floor.

Ben felt a block of ice begin to form in his heart. Forcing a smile he feared was probably more of a grimace, he managed, "Did she say what it was about?"

"No. She was here before I got in. She left me this note." Martha waved a piece of paper toward Ben. "It just says, 'Have Ben Richman see me ASAP. Urgent.'" Ben could see Janet's tall, angular scrawl across the page. He nodded his thanks and moved down the hall toward his office, which was located three doors down from Janet's much-

larger corner suite. He felt numb. He couldn't remember any of the words he had planned so carefully and rehearsed in his head on the way in to work. This was it. His worst nightmare was about to come true. He would be fired, humiliated, disgraced.

He stopped in his office long enough to put his briefcase on his desk. Why bother turning on his computer? She'd probably be asking him to pack and leave by the end of the day. Not wishing to delay the inevitable any longer, he walked toward Janet's open door as if heading toward his own funeral.

Janet looked up with an expression of relief as Ben tapped lightly on her door. She was in her mid-forties with auburn hair falling in rich waves around her shoulders. Her green eyes were narrow, their slant giving her a devilish look, especially when she smiled, which was often. Though time had softened her jawline and left tiny wrinkles at the corners of her eyes and around her mouth, she was still a very attractive woman.

"Ben, glad you're here. We've got a situation. I need your expertise."

"My what?" Ben was confused.

"The Bracken deal. There's word on the street they're about to make an offer for Pennington. You did the primary research when we recommended Pennington, as I recall. You pointed out how they had a lot of excess manufacturing capacity but almost no fixed cost associated with it. Bracken has had some huge increases in R&D spending the last few years. Do you think Bracken has a hit product and doesn't have the capacity to manufacture it and get it to market fast enough? Pennington would be perfect for them. They would solve all their problems. I want you to pour over those numbers and see if this is plausible because if it is, we're going to make a killing on the stock and options!"

Ben sank slowly into the chair in front of Janet's desk. Relief coursed through his body, leaving him limp. He tried to force himself to focus on what she was saying. He urged his mind to click back on and access the information she was asking for. *She didn't know...not yet.*

"Hey, you okay?" Janet cocked her head at him.

Ben managed a smile. "Yeah. I'm fine." He leaned forward in his chair. "Let's talk a little more about the details."

The sky was already darkening outside when Ben pushed away from his keyboard. He had provided the backup analysis Janet asked of him and worked on several projects currently in the hopper. Now he leaned back in his chair as he laced his fingers behind his head. At least a dozen times over the course of the day he'd started to call Janet's office, to see when he could come by to talk to her. Each time he'd stopped himself, not quite finding the courage to face her.

The summons by Janet that morning had been a false alarm but that didn't mean he could expect the situation to last forever. Indeed, Carl might go over her head, giving the damning DVD to the CEO. Or he might be planning to do nothing at all with it. Perhaps Carl was only interested in interfering with David and Ben's relationship,

which would make what Ben had decided to do now a fool's errand. Yet to do nothing and take his chances was intolerable. He would be forever on tenterhooks, waiting for the other shoe to fall.

Before he could talk himself out of it yet again, Ben swiveled toward the phone and pressed the button for Janet's private line, bypassing Ellen, her secretary.

"Janet Wesley."

"Janet, I need to talk to you. Have you got a minute?"

"Yes, actually. I've got several. In fact, I was thinking of calling it a day and heading out early. Want to get a bite? I hear that bar the accounting guys go to on the corner has incredible burgers. Come on, we'll talk there."

Ben realized he was hungry. He'd been too edgy earlier to eat lunch. "Sure," he said. What he had to say would definitely be easier over a bite to eat and something to drink. "I'll meet you by the elevators in five?"

Ben glanced at his watch and tried David's cell again. His voice mail had picked up the two times he'd tried earlier and Ben hadn't felt like leaving a message. This time he connected with David. "Ben! I was just thinking of you."

"You were, huh?" Ben couldn't suppress his smile. Just hearing David's voice made him happy.

"I've been wondering all day how things went this morning! Did Carl spill the beans? Or were you able to get to your boss in time?"

"Not so far he hasn't. And no, I haven't talked to my boss yet. There was too much going on today and the timing just didn't seem right. But I'm going to speak to her about it now."

"Well, call me right after and let me know. I just finished the photo shoot, finally! You would not believe this photographer. Talk about a prima donna! I thought he'd *never* be satisfied with the lighting. We've been at it all day. I'm only about twenty blocks from your office. We could meet somewhere in the middle, if you want. Get some dinner."

"Oh, I'm sorry, David. I can't meet for dinner. When I told Janet I needed to speak to her, she suggested we do it over burgers at a restaurant near here she wanted to try. I figure it'll be easier to talk to her there than in her office."

"No problem. We'll connect later."

"Sounds good. Can't wait to see you." Ben smiled, feeling warm and happy. Then he remembered what he was about to do and the lump of ice that had formed in his chest that morning returned.

They sat together at a high table near the bar on backless stools. Though it was only Monday, the place was crowded. Two televisions were on over the bar, each one showing a different ballgame. The clink of glassware and the hum of conversation around them created a kind of privacy of its own.

The waiter, a young man with very short spiked hair, took their order and faded away. Over mugs of draft beer they made small talk until their burgers and onion rings arrived. Ben decided to wait until they'd finished eating before breaking his news.

When their plates had been cleared and their beer mugs refilled, Janet said, "So. What was it you wanted to talk to me about?"

Ben took a breath. "Me."

"That's rather vague," Janet replied, her expression quizzical.

"I'm not quite sure how to begin so I'll just dive right in. I know this isn't something that comes up on the job, nor should it, but I wanted you to know I'm gay." He paused, waiting for her to exclaim in horror or at least surprise, but she only cocked her head slightly, as if to say, "Go on."

He plunged on. "I'm only telling you because of something that's happened. Something that could compromise my job. I love working here and I want to head this off at the pass. If there's anything to head off, that is."

"You're talking in circles, Ben. As to your sexual orientation, I figured you were gay a long time ago."

"You did?" Ben was startled. He usually passed for straight. Not that he especially cared—he wasn't ashamed of his orientation, in fact he embraced it. But people usually assumed he was straight and, as receptive as some parts of society might be, Wall Street was still very much a "good old boy" kind of network. It was much easier to be accepted as straight, a fact that offended him, but to which he had resigned himself.

"Sure." Janet laughed and took a long drink of her beer. "I sense these things. I have pretty good 'gaydar'. Maybe I was just born with it. Or maybe," she paused for dramatic effect, staring head-on at Ben as she said, "it takes one to know one."

It took a moment for what Janet was saying to sink in. It takes one to know one? Was she saying she was...? "You're gay?" he blurted.

Janet nodded and cocked an eyebrow. "Got a problem with that?"

"No! No, of course not. I just had no idea."

"Faulty gaydar," Janet quipped. "Or maybe yours only works on guys."

Ben was silent, thinking back to various events and dinners they'd attended. Janet had always been accompanied by a man, though not always the same one. Ben had just assumed they were her date. He'd known she wasn't married and because of her age, had assumed she was divorced. She went on. "Like you, it's not something I discuss at the office. As they say, discretion is the better part of valor, especially in this bastion of neoconservative reactionaries called Wall Street. But we're all over the place, aren't we?" Janet gave a wry grin, lowering her voice conspiratorially. "Infiltrating the ranks, slipping into management and beyond."

She sighed heavily, the irony leaving her voice. "Who knows, maybe one day we won't have to play it so close to the chest. Maybe over the next twenty years or so gay people will really be free to live their lives completely in the open, not just when it suits

society to acknowledge us in cute little TV roles or on Gay Pride Day. Maybe someday civil rights will finally extend to every citizen in the grand old U.S. of A." Her voice had taken on a bitter tone.

Ben nodded. It was a soapbox he stood on as well. He was still surprised with her news but quickly realized it made his task much easier. At least homophobia would not be part of this equation. "Well, here's the thing," he finally said. "I had this boyfriend. We broke up awhile back. Or rather, I broke up with him. He didn't take it well. He's the sort of man who can't take no for an answer, I guess. He, uh, he did something. Something that could compromise me if it gets out."

"I'm all ears," Janet said, leaning forward, her green eyes glittering.

Ben felt himself flushing. He forced himself to continue. "He secretly taped a, um, a sexual thing between us. I didn't know he had done it. He decided to let me know by giving my new boyfriend the DVD, dropping it by his place anonymously."

"Sounds like a real jerk," Janet said. "So I take it whatever you were doing wasn't exactly something you'd like to share with our CEO, and you figure that's where the next copy of the DVD is going to show up, if it hasn't already."

"You got it," Ben said. "This morning when you left that note for me it was urgent I see you right away, I figured that was it—I was in deep shit."

Janet laughed. "I bet you did! That probably cut two years off your life! Sorry about that. But no, I haven't received a copy. Have you thought of calling this guy and telling him to knock it off?"

"I have, yes. But knowing Carl, it would just spur him on. Hell hath no fury..."

"Like a lover scorned," Janet paraphrased. "Are you talking about Carl Young? The deal guy up at Caldwell and Cooper?"

Ben knew his face gave him away. He hadn't meant to "out" Carl, even if the guy was despicable. Janet laughed. "Isn't that rich! What an ass! If he does try any shit with this sex tape of yours, just turn it right back at him. He's in it too, right?"

"Not his face, no. I'm the only identifiable person."

"Well, a sex tape is a not a crime."

"No, I know. That's what David said too." He couldn't help the smile that flitted over his face as he said David's name.

Janet smiled in response. "Still, there's no reason why the CEO or anyone else should be viewing it. I quite agree. Here's what we'll do. You know nothing gets past the secretaries. They control the flow of information around here, just like they do in any office. I'll have Ellen put the word out. If anyone gets a package marked confidential and it contains what could be a DVD, they'll give her a heads-up. We can't ask to inspect other people's mail of course. But this way at least I won't have to alert any upper management unless absolutely necessary. If something does show up, well, we'll leap off that bridge when we come to it."

Ben felt overcome with gratitude. He'd been girding himself all day for his boss's possible outrage, disgust or at the very least disapproval. He certainly hadn't expected her staunch support or her sharing such an intimate detail about her own life. "Thanks, Janet. I really appreciate it."

"Hey," Janet said, patting his arm. "I like you, Ben. Always have. You're a good, hard worker who puts forward his best effort every day. I don't care if you're gay or straight or pansexual, whatever the hell that is." She laughed but quickly sobered. "Our private lives are, by definition, private. I trusted you with what I did just to let you know you're not alone. If that creep tries to mess with your career, he's going to have Janet Wesley to deal with." Her eyes flashed, her expression grim with determination. After a moment her face softened. "Now finish your drink. I've got a sweet little thing at home waiting for me," she said with a grin.

Chapter Eight

"Negative." Ben held out the piece of paper with a smile.

"Me too," David said. Not that either of them expected otherwise, having both practiced safe sex in their prior relationships. Nevertheless, they'd agreed the week before it was a good idea to get tested for HIV, just for peace of mind.

"You know what this means, right?" David said, his dark blue eyes blazing with lust. Ben nodded, his cock nudging in response. He could almost feel the hot clench of David's ass, all the more intense with no latex sheath to dull the sensation.

They left the health clinic together and walked the long city blocks toward Ben's apartment. "Hey, when did you first know you were gay?" David asked out of the blue.

"I always knew, I guess. I mean, I don't suppose I really thought about it much until I was a teenager, but I've always been attracted to guys."

"Did anyone else know? I mean, like your family, your friends?"

"My mom always knew. She was cool about it. She said she just wanted me to be happy. My dad was a little slower to come around. I once overheard him asking my mom what they'd done to turn me into a homosexual. I have two older brothers and they'd turned out 'normal'." Ben laughed. "At school I was a lot more discreet. Even though Houston is a big city, the mindset, at least at my high school, was still pretty reactionary when it came to things like sexual orientation. I remember once we had this assembly about tolerance. They talked a lot about racial and religious tolerance but barely touched on sexual orientation. One of the speakers mentioned it briefly and the guy next to me leaned over and said, 'I can take niggers and spics, but if a fag gets near me, I'll punch his fucking lights out.'"

"Nice," David said sarcastically. "Did you react?"

"I told him to shut up. I didn't say 'you're sitting next to one' or anything like that. It would be years before I became comfortable enough with myself to be openly gay."

"Same here. I didn't tell a soul until I went to college. Shit, I barely told myself!" David said. He reached for Ben's hand, taking it lightly in his own. They held hands as they walked, each aware of the statement they were making to the world.

The day after Ben had his talk with Janet, it had been work as usual. In the office, she was as crisp and professional as ever. No mention was made of their conversation except through an interoffice email in which Janet said cryptically, "No news is good news. I'll keep you posted."

David continued to spend each night at Ben's house during the week. He hadn't brought up his "secret" again and Ben hadn't probed. Yet it was not forgotten, not by him and he doubted by David either. Though they still laughed and talked together,

there was a carefulness that hadn't been there before. A hesitation at times, as if each were weighing what he said before saying it, not wanting to upset the other.

This made Ben sad. Part of what he'd loved about their new relationship was how easy it was to talk. There were no taboo topics, nothing to tiptoe around. Toward the end with Carl, nearly everything seemed off-limits except the weather. Ben had never known when an innocent remark would be misconstrued, setting off a jealous tirade about imagined lovers lurking in the wings.

While things were nothing like that between David and Ben, the ease was gone. Ben wanted it back, but he didn't know how to get it. He knew he needed to be patient but sometimes it was hard. Sometimes he wanted to grab David and demand he trust him more, that he feel safe enough to confide any and everything to him. Yet he knew one couldn't demand trust, any more than one could demand love.

Ben retrieved the wad of mail stuffed into his mailbox in the foyer of the apartment building. He riffled through it as they climbed the stairs. Just junk mail and bills as usual. Ben had barely dropped the envelopes onto the hall table before David pushed him up against the door, pressing him back by the shoulders as he kissed him long and hard. Ben responded with an ardent sigh, his cock engorging as David pressed his hard, perfect body against him, pinning him to the door.

When at last he pulled back, David was breathing hard. Keeping his eyes locked on Ben's, he grabbed the hem of his shirt and pulled it over his head, revealing his hard, smooth chest. Their eyes remained locked as each man unbuttoned, unzipped, stepped out of and tossed his clothing willy-nilly to the floor.

In a moment they were both naked. "I want you in the worst way," David said hoarsely. "Let's shower." He reached down, gently clasping Ben's erection with one hand. Without releasing it, he began to walk backward, drawing Ben along by his cock.

Ben allowed himself to be led, feeling the thump of blood pounding through his cock as it tingled in David's sure grip. In the bathroom, David opened the shower stall door. He released Ben's cock as he reached in to turn on the hot water.

"Get in," David said, his voice commanding. "I'll be right back." He returned a moment later with a tube of lubricant in his hand. He placed it on the shower shelf next to the shampoo. They stood together under the hot spray, their arms coming around each other as they kissed. After a few moments they shampooed their hair and washed their bodies.

Ben reached for the liquid soap. He squirted some in one hand and then rubbed his hands together to create a generous lather. Kneeling in front of David, he soaped his cock and thighs, reaching between his legs to massage his ass cheeks.

"Turn around," he said, and David obeyed. Ben squeezed more soap onto his fingers and gently ran them along the cleft of David's ass before letting the water rinse him clean. David in turn washed his lover, though he paused for several minutes to suck Ben's cock once he'd rinsed it clean.

Nearing orgasm, Ben gasped, "Shall we get out?"

"No," David said, his voice low. "I want to take you here. Now." He stood, magnificent, his hair dripping and curling, his long lashes glistening with water droplets, his cock thick, long and fully erect. Ben felt a thrill of desire leap through him like a bolt of lightning. David handed him the tube of lubricant. "You know what to do."

Ben knelt, squeezing a generous amount of lubricant over the head of David's cock, keenly aware he planned to penetrate him for the first time without a condom. He was aching to do the same to David, but at the moment he was in David's thrall, nearly desperate to receive him.

He had thought David would kneel behind him in the large stall, so he could penetrate him doggy style. Instead he said, "Stand up." As Ben stood, David spun him gently toward one wall and leaned up against him, pinning him there. Ben could feel the hard press of his erect shaft between his cheeks. It was slippery and warm. "You ready for me?" David whispered, his voice a low, sultry tease.

"Yes," Ben whispered back. "God, yes." He felt the head of David's cock nudging at his nether entrance. David pulled back a little to angle himself better. Then he leaned forward, his cock slipping in easily. Ben groaned his pleasure, clenching his anal muscles against the hard shaft as David pressed it home.

David's body draped his as he reached down and grabbed Ben's wrists, lifting his arms high against the wall, pinning him in cruciform as he fucked him. The feeling was incredible—his cock mashed against the wet wall as David slammed into him, each thrust more intense than the last. David's warm breath tickled his ear as he panted behind him.

He felt him go rigid in the moments before orgasm, his grip on Ben's wrists loosening. Ben contracted and eased his muscles to milk his lover's seed. A shudder moved through David's body as he trembled in ecstasy against him. After a series of short, spasmodic thrusts, David finally sagged heavily against him. He could feel his lover's heart beating against his back. He stood strong, supporting David's weight as he gave him time to recover.

His own cock still pulsed with blood, pinned between his belly and the wall. As David drew back, Ben could feel his anal muscles clinging to his shaft, not wanting to release him. The act had been swift, David's urgency and the heightened sensitivity with no condom no doubt making it all the faster. Ben knew there would be time, plenty of time, to savor one another until they were both completely sated.

He turned and knelt in front of David, lovingly washing his cock with soap and hot water before reaching back to shut off the water. They dried themselves and moved to the bedroom, dropping together on the cool cotton sheets.

This time the lovemaking was slower, less urgent, but no less passionate. David kissed and teased Ben's cock to rock-hardness. Lovingly he lubricated Ben's naked cock before crouching on his hands and knees in a clear invitation. Ben positioned himself

behind his lover. Forcing himself to go slowly, he entered David's hot, tight tunnel, savoring its erotic embrace.

Once David's body had acclimated to the invasion, they began to move together in a sensual dance, its rhythm as ancient as any mating ritual. His eyes closed in rapture, Ben reached for and found David's cock, already semierect despite his recent orgasm. He coaxed it to its full potential and continued to stroke it as he took his own pleasure. The grip of David's ass was exquisite, the sensation against his bare cock like a thousand tiny fingers massaging him into ecstasy.

Their orgasms came only seconds apart as they thrust and moved like a single entity, writhing and arching against one another as each cried the other's name. As they fell together, Ben's shaft remained buried in his lover's warm, willing body. He wrapped his arms around him and nuzzled his face against David's neck.

As they drifted to an endorphin-soaked sleep, David murmured, "I love you, Ben."

But do you trust me? The thought entered his mind uninvited. He forced it away, answering only, "Me too you."

* * * * *

David stood in the center of Ben's living room, repeating his lines until he no longer needed to refer to the script in his hand. He glanced at his watch—it would probably be another hour before Ben returned from the office.

Ben never had found his spare building key, but he'd managed to get another from his landlord for David to use. David still felt slightly unsure about crashing at the apartment on weekdays while Ben was at work, yet Ben seemed perfectly at ease with the arrangement. It certainly beat traveling all the way back to Queens when he had to be back for a rehearsal or show that same evening.

He heard the sound of a key turning in the lock and cocked his head, confused. Had Ben finished early today for some reason? He watched as the door opened, prepared to see Ben in his "Wall Street uniform" of suit and tie, his briefcase in hand, every bit the corporate executive.

Instead another man entered, not as tall as Ben, of a more stocky build, also in a suit, though the tie had been removed, several buttons opened above a powerful chest. He was holding a folder in his hand. It took David a second longer to identify the man—Carl!

"What the hell!" he said, his voice raised. Carl spun toward him, clearly not expecting anyone to be there.

His expression darkened as he realized who was standing in front of him. "Does Ben know you're here?" Carl had the nerve to demand.

"Of course he does! Who do you think you are coming in here like this? I'm going to call the police!"

Carl pursed his lips, staring hard at David, who glowered back. "Don't be ridiculous. I used my keys. Ben and I still see each other. Didn't he tell you? Or has he kept our continuing relationship a secret? There seem to be any number of secrets between you two, am I right?"

David, who had been advancing toward Carl, stopped in his tracks. Still seeing each other? He shook his head. The man was making it up to mess with his head. Surely he would have known if Ben were still seeing Carl!

Carl, watching him, gave a low, cruel laugh. "No, I can see you don't know I'm still fucking your new boyfriend. He tells me my cock is much bigger than yours." David felt rage surging up into his blood like lava. He clenched his fists at his sides and began again to move toward Carl.

Carl held up a slim gray folder, pointing it toward David like a weapon. "As to secrets," he continued, the cruel smile still pasted on his face, "you're still keeping the big one, aren't you, Anderson? While sharing your little life stories with one another, you forgot to mention the murder of your lover, eh?"

The lava spilled from David's blood into his brain, obscuring anything but his desperate need to smash that handsome face. Lunging, he brought up his fist, intent on making contact with Carl's jaw. His swing went wild as Carl adroitly ducked and swiveled behind him. David swung around, determined to wipe the smug look off Carl's face.

As his fist made contact with Carl's jaw, Carl's fist smashed into his stomach, doubling him over. David fell to his knees, the breath momentarily knocked out of him. When he looked up, Carl had fled, leaving the apartment door open behind him.

* * * * *

When Ben arrived home that evening David was waiting by the door. "I'm so glad you're home. I didn't want to tell you on the phone." David looked so upset.

"What is it? Are you okay? Is someone in your family ill?"

"No, no. Nothing like that. It's Carl. You have to change the locks. He's got the keys." Ben was silent, digesting this disturbing bit of news.

"Was he here? Did he bother you?"

"He was, and yes, you could say that he bothered me." David gave a weak smile. "He punched me in the gut right after I socked him in the jaw."

"David! You hit him?"

"Yeah. He said some awful lies about you. I lost my temper."

"Did he hurt you? Are you all right?"

"Yeah, I'm okay. No permanent damage. He just knocked the wind out of me. I hope I broke his fucking jaw. He ran out of here before I got a chance to see if I'd done much damage."

"Jesus. I can't believe you didn't call me right away!"

"What could you have done other than panic? I knew you'd be home soon anyway. If he hadn't left when he did, I was prepared to call 911. Anyway, you definitely have to get your apartment door key changed and let the super know someone has stolen the building key."

Ben nodded. "I can't believe he'd dare to come here like that. Just waltzing in like he owned the place. I guess he didn't count on your being here. I wonder how many other times the bastard has broken in without our knowledge." He looked around the room, scowling.

From the way Ben was talking, David was reasonably certain Carl's horrible remarks about "fucking his boyfriend" were pure bravado, designed entirely to upset David and cause discord between Ben and him. He decided not to dignify the cruel lies by mentioning them to Ben. Instead he said, "Call the locksmith now. And put the super on notice so he can change the main locks."

David glanced at his watch. He was already going to be late for rehearsal but he'd wanted to see Ben before he left. "Are you going to be okay? I have to go—I'm late. But I'll stay if you need me to. The asshole might try to come back."

"No, you go on. I'm not afraid of Carl. Not anymore. I'll put the chain on and if he shows up, I'll call the police."

David nodded, leaning forward to kiss Ben's cheek. He patted his pants pocket. "I have my cell phone. Call me if you need me. I'll come by when rehearsal's over."

* * * * *

Ben sat down to the dinner David had left for him. He found David's concern for him very touching—"I'll stay if you need me to..." Was this the man for him at last? Handsome, talented, kind, domestic—he speared another bite of the delicious tortellini with a homemade Alfredo sauce—sexy as hell and even willing to fight for Ben's honor...

Ben smiled at the thought but then frowned. He wondered just what lies Carl had told to upset David so. He hadn't volunteered what had been said, but then he had been in a hurry. They could discuss it all at length when he came home.

Why had Carl shown up at his apartment, letting himself in at a time he knew Ben would still be at work? What evil had he planned to commit before David stopped him in his tracks?

Finished with his dinner, Ben decided to make a careful survey of his apartment. Had Carl taken anything? Had he been there before? Had he perhaps planted his mini-camcorder in Ben's bedroom and now had come to retrieve it? Ben shook his head with doubt, but nevertheless he looked carefully in all the rooms for anything out of place or that didn't belong.

Finally he returned to the living room, sweeping it with his eyes as he pondered. Recalling old spy movies, he even felt beneath the tables for an electronic bug but found nothing. "I've spent enough time on you, Carl," he said aloud, annoyed the man was still invading his space after all this time.

He walked over to the hall table to check his mail. Beneath the pile of envelopes lay a slim gray folder. Curious, Ben picked it up and opened it. The first page was a kind of credit report, he realized, after scanning it for a moment. He looked for the name at the top—*David J. Anderson*. This must be David's file, something he left here, he thought. Maybe he's applying for a loan.

He lifted the page and saw beneath it a copy of an old newspaper article, dating back to 1998. He read the headline.

New York University Freshman Charged with Vehicular Manslaughter. Faces One to Three Years in Jail.

Moving toward a chair, Ben sat, the blood suddenly running cold in his veins. The story outlined the death of one James Clarkson, age twenty, also of NYU, a passenger in the car driven by David Anderson, age eighteen, who lost control of the vehicle while driving under the influence of alcohol. The article was short and to the point, taking up only a few square inches of newsprint. No doubt there were many more sensational or important stories that day, at least to those not in the Anderson or Clarkson family.

Ben held the paper in his hand as he stared into space. David, poor David. This was the secret he hadn't yet had the courage to confide. This must have been what Carl had come for. To leave the folder for Ben or possibly to confront him directly. Ben tried to imagine what it must have been like for David—so young! The article had mentioned jail—had David gone to prison?

He wanted to call David right away—to tell him he knew and it was okay. It was an accident. It was years before. Instead he waited, not wanting to pull David away from his rehearsal, not wanting to upset him. Yet he knew he couldn't keep his newfound knowledge a secret. David would have to know.

"Carl, you bastard," Ben whispered. He'd taken from David the chance to come forward himself. He'd taken from Ben the chance to create a place safe enough for David to confide on his own.

* * * * *

David hurried back to Ben's place, anxious lest that son of a bitch had hassled Ben. As he emerged from the subway station, he called Ben to let him know he was on his way. "Is everything okay?" he asked when Ben picked up. "Did that asshole bother you?"

"No, I haven't heard a word from him. Hurry home though. I need to see you."

David flipped the phone shut, a warm feeling easing through him. Ben needed him! He hurried down the block, eager to take Ben into his arms. He raced up the stairs and

knocked lightly at the door before unlocking it. "It's me," he called so Ben wouldn't worry. Ben was on the other side, removing the chain to welcome him in. David held out his arms to embrace him.

Rather stiffly, it seemed to David, Ben stepped into them. Lightly he touched David's lips with his before stepping back. "David. Carl left something here. I think that was his purpose in coming."

"He did? What did he leave?" David suddenly recalled the folder he'd seen in Carl's hand when he'd entered. In the heat of his rage, he'd forgotten all about it. Ben retrieved the folder from the coffee table and took a page from it, holding it out to David.

As David read, he felt his head grow light, as if all the blood were draining away. "Oh my god," he whispered. "James..." He barely noticed as Ben guided him to the couch and pressed him gently to sit. Suddenly he was there, in the dark, in the rain, nauseated, terrified, confused... He continued to stare at the page as if there were more to read, something to uncover he hadn't seen before. The paper was fluttering oddly in his grip and he realized his hand was trembling. He pressed his hands between his knees, crunching the wretched piece of paper as he did so.

"David. Look at me. It's okay. It's time to talk about it. You don't have to hide anymore. It's okay."

Slowly David looked over at Ben, for a moment barely recognizing him. He stared into his kind eyes and some of the darkness clouding his mind lifted. "Ben," he said softly. "I wanted to tell you."

"I know. I do. Maybe this was the best way. Maybe Carl did us a favor. Talk to me, David. Help me understand. The few sentences on that page don't begin to tell the real story. Tell me what really happened."

"He leaves me no choice. That bastard has dictated when and how I tell you."

"Wrong. You do have a choice. You can decide not to tell me, to keep it held in and buried in a twisted, dark place in your head, or you can decide to trust me. You said you loved me. Where does trust fit in? We're only as sick as our secrets, David, and I don't want there to be any between us."

David leaned forward, his elbows on his knees. He dropped his head into his hands, his mind churning. Finally he looked up. "You're right. I do have a choice. I want to tell you. You know the facts anyway from that article. I'll try to explain."

He paused, staring into space, trying to decide how to confess the sins of so long ago in a way that wouldn't alienate Ben. Nearly a minute passed as he tried to formulate his thoughts. Ben waited patiently. Gently he reached out and took David's hand. David began to speak, aware there was no way to clean this up. He would simply tell the truth.

"It was the first time I'd been away from home. The first time I'd dared to be somewhat open about my sexual orientation. There was a gay-lesbian political action group on campus and I joined it, mostly to meet guys. For the first time in my life I was

free to explore with other men. To actually be with another man instead of just fantasizing about them while masturbating.

"There was one guy in particular. James Clarkson. Ah, James..." He hadn't said his name in so long, had barely even thought it. They'd come together in a fire of passion. James was older by two years, a junior and well acquainted with the ways of the world, or so it seemed to the young David. "He was something, was James," David recalled, seeing the redheaded handsome boy in his mind's eye. "He was the kind of person everyone's eye turned to when he entered a room. He had this sort of charisma that drew people in, even people who didn't know him at all. He was so enthusiastic about whatever his latest cause was, and there was always a latest cause for James. He would energize the people around him, getting them to volunteer for things they might have had no interest in otherwise. He was always putting together benefits, raising social awareness, getting involved.

"He had this way of making a person feel special. When he spoke, you felt as if he were speaking directly you, even if he were addressing a crowd. He had a way of making eye contact, of tilting his head just so, as if to say, 'you and I understand in a way no one else can'. It made you feel connected, superior to those around you, eager to do whatever he might ask."

David glanced at Ben, who was listening with a quiet attentiveness. He gave a small nod but didn't interrupt. David looked straight ahead again, sitting back slightly. "Well, needless to say, I fell head over heels for him. I had to get in line—every guy in the group had a crush on him and half the girls as well." He gave a small laugh. "I was a gangly, awkward eighteen-year-old. I never dreamed I had a chance with him, a junior and so popular. But for some reason he took a liking to me. He took me under his wing, including me in the private parties, inviting me to be involved in various political committees, and," David paused with a wry grin, "taking me into his bed."

"He was your first?" Ben asked.

"Yes. My first. If I'd had any questions about whether I was really gay or just curious, he answered them all with a resounding yes! I fell hard for him. The kind of puppy love that is so consuming the rest of the world seems to fall away. Instead of taking notes in class, I'd fill the pages with his name, written over and over like some kind of secret code. I was obsessed with him. I adored him. Life seemed to stop until he was with me and then everything clicked back on and all was right with the world." Again he glanced at Ben, who nodded, smiling as if he had a similar memory of his own.

David looked down at his hands, dreading what he was going to say next. He'd suppressed the memories for so long. He'd thought the wound had scarred over with time. It was certainly one he'd hoped never to touch again. Yet now his own words probed at it like a burning, sharp knife. He took a breath and continued. "He drank a lot. I mean, everybody did. We'd go to the college pub and order a couple of pitchers of beer and go on from there. There was never liquor in my parents' house and I'd never been a drinker before college. I didn't have much tolerance, but I found I enjoyed the

relaxed, easy feeling I got when I had a buzz. I suddenly didn't feel so young and insecure after a few drinks.

"Sometimes after the pub closed, James would invite back a chosen few to his room. He didn't have a roommate—a great luxury and not one afforded to freshmen. He would pull out a bottle of brandy or gin and mix drinks for us with soda he kept in a portable refrigerator. I thought it was all very sophisticated and fun. Often he would dismiss the others and keep just me with him. He'd make love to me all night. I thought I had died and gone to heaven.

"One night he invited me back to his room along with this other guy—Hank. We all got pretty drunk and instead of telling Hank good night, he said, 'Wouldn't it be fun, the three of us? That can be very hot, you know.' I didn't know what he meant at first but Hank sure did. In a moment the guy had stripped to his underwear. James was casually stripping as well, as if it were no big deal for the three of us to have sex.

"I was shocked and hurt. I had this notion, you see, that he was in love with me. With the egocentricity of an eighteen-year-old idiot, I thought James was seeing only me and in love with only me. In fact he wasn't in love with anyone. He was just James, spreading the wealth of his enthusiasm for life with whoever cared to partake."

"Did you stay? With the two of them?"

"Yeah. I went along. I didn't have the nerve to protest. Being perennially horny, I was able to get an erection and I suppose I had fun as far as it went. But I was jealous. And angry. I felt betrayed. I didn't voice any of this. Instead I left his room as soon as the sexual gymnastics were over. I took his bottle of brandy with me, intent on drinking myself into a stupor.

"He came and found me about a half-hour later. I'd had more than a few drinks by that point. I was pretty drunk but I'm fairly good about not showing it, so he didn't realize the extent. I didn't realize it either, in retrospect. Oh god, if only he hadn't come to find me. If only we hadn't..." David's voice cracked and he dropped his head into his hands. He felt Ben's arm drape protectively around his shoulder.

"It's okay, it's all right. You're safe now. You're with me. It's okay, David. As hard as this must be for you, I think you need to say it out loud. It's still holding you hostage. It's time to let it go."

"No, you don't understand. I can never let it go. It was my fault. My fault." He felt tears pressing hot and heavy behind his lids. He didn't want to cry. He had to get through this. He almost couldn't bear Ben's sympathetic, kind expression. The last thing he wanted was to be pitied by Ben. Yet there was no going back. He had to tell it all now. He would do it. It would be a relief in a way. Just to get it over with.

"I killed him," he blurted. "I killed James Clarkson." He had thought he would burst into tears as he confessed this, but instead David found he felt curiously cold, empty, devoid of feeling.

"Go on," Ben whispered, again clasping his hand. "Just say the words. Take away their power over you. Tell me what happened."

David nodded and forced himself to continue. "He came and found me in my room. He apologized, said he hadn't realized I would be upset by us playing with Hank. I snapped back at him I found that pretty hard to believe. We began to argue and my roommate got mad since it was three in the morning. He told us to shut up or get out. I was still dressed so we left the room.

"It was drizzling out so instead of a walk, James suggested we take a drive. I had a car on campus. James, who was from the city, hadn't learned to drive though he was twenty. I knew I shouldn't get behind the wheel but I was restless and angry. I agreed and we drove off, heading toward the East River Drive. As James started telling me in his kind, gentle way that I must have misunderstood what we shared, that he loved me, but wasn't a one guy kind of person, I started driving faster and faster. I remember I was clenching the wheel. It had started to rain pretty hard. It was late and there wasn't much traffic. I must have been going close to ninety when I lost control of the car. We smashed into the guardrail and the impact caused James to be jettisoned through the windshield. He wasn't wearing his seat belt." David's voice rose to nearly a shout. "I killed him! I killed the man I claimed to love. He was only twenty years old with his whole life ahead of him. I killed him."

David bent over, grabbing his knees. He began to rock, tears spilling hot over his face. When he felt Ben's hand on his shoulder, he began to sob, the misery, the agony of that time washing over him, submerging him, drowning him. James' face loomed in his mind, his mane of red hair, his engaging, wide grin, and then the grayness of that dead visage, life smashed from it on impact, nothing left but skin, bone, blood...

David cried for James. He cried for himself. He cried for the lost year spent in jail, the time there still a vague blur he'd blocked out, recalling only gray – the gray concrete bricks of his cell, the gray food that tasted like glue and sawdust, the gray sky over the gray courtyard where he was allowed to walk each day for two hours, the gray faces of the miserable, angry men around him...

He cried until he had no voice and all his tears were spent. He cried until his body was racked with dry, heaving, shuddering sobs. All the while Ben held him, stroking him, his words soothing.

Finally he let go of his knees and fell back exhausted against the cushions. His eyes were swollen and sticky, his face wet with tears and mucus. He heard Ben stand, move away and return. He felt Ben gently wipe his face with a tissue and then a cool washcloth. It felt good against his heated skin. He found he didn't want to move. Not ever again. He would just sit there and let Ben stroke his face and never think again.

Finally he opened his eyes and sat up. He was almost surprised as he looked down at his arms and legs and saw he was still in one piece. Ben patted his arm and said gently, "You were eighteen, David. You were a boy. It's terrible what happened, but it was an accident. Nothing more."

"That's not what the State of New York said. I was convicted of vehicular manslaughter. I was sentenced to one to three years. I got out in one, but I never went back to school. His family sued me in a civil suit as well, but it never went anywhere.

My parents were horrified by the whole thing. I sometimes think they were more upset to learn I was gay than that I'd killed someone.

"I've never told anyone, Ben. I probably wouldn't have found the courage to tell you if it weren't for that article. But now you know. I'm a murderer and convicted felon. Makes sucking someone off in a bathroom stall seem a bit tame by comparison, wouldn't you say?" He tried to laugh but it came out more as a bark.

Ben was quiet for a long while. David figured he was preparing his departure speech, thinking of a way to exit gracefully. He glanced toward him, expecting the worst. Instead, to his astonishment, he saw Ben was crying! Not sobbing as he had done, but tears were rolling down his cheeks. "You poor man," Ben said softly. "I can see this has haunted you your entire life. It's probably what's kept you from connecting with someone, from truly connecting. I'm so sorry, David. So sorry this happened to you."

He reached out, wrapping his arms around David, who sat stiff, unsure. He felt Ben's wet cheek against his own and on impulse he turned toward him, burying his face against Ben's neck. Ben sat back, pulling him down so David's head rested in his lap.

"I know that was so, so hard for you to tell me, David. You've been keeping it inside, buried for so many years. Even if they convicted you, it was an accident. A tragic accident, but one you've paid the price for a thousand times over."

David closed his eyes as Ben folded and draped the damp cloth over them. "Rest now, my love. I think you'll find sharing the burden makes it lighter. Thank you for trusting me as you did." He continued to stroke David's face, smoothing the hair from his forehead, cradling his cheek in his hand.

"You're not leaving?" David whispered, his heart fluttering.

"Of course I'm not leaving!" Ben said, surprise in his voice. "Is that what you thought? That I'd run away once I knew? Listen, you repaid your debt to society, if there was one. Wearing this memory like a hair shirt all these years won't bring James back. It happened a long time ago. You've punished yourself enough. Now you need to let it go."

"Do you forgive me?" David dared to ask, glad his eyes were hidden beneath the washcloth.

"It's not for me to forgive. It is you who must forgive yourself."

Chapter Nine

Carl sat in his living room, naked beneath his open bathrobe. He leaned back in his favorite chair with one hand on his cock. In the other was a tumbler of whiskey over crushed ice. He was lost in thought, his mind on the past, on his favorite subject, on his obsession, on Ben...

He took a large swallow of his drink, lifting his hand from his cock to stroke his jaw. That bastard had landed a good one before Carl stopped him in his tracks with a sucker punch. He'd left a bad bruise, though nothing was broken. Three days passed and the bruise had faded from blotchy purple to an ugly pale green. He'd had to lie at work as Mary Ann hovered anxiously over him, pretending he'd tripped and hit the corner of a table in the dark.

He'd expected Ben to call, at the very least to bluster and rage over his still possessing keys to the apartment. Perhaps he'd been struck dumb by the damning evidence left in that folder. He hoped it had been Ben and not David who had seen it first. He realized it was possible David had spotted it before Ben returned and disposed of it before his lover could learn the sordid truth.

Carl sighed, his hand again returning to stroke his cock. Even after all this time, he still missed Ben. Intellectually he knew he needed to move on. Yet he couldn't help but cling to a slim thread of hope. At the very least, there was no way Ben could tolerate continuing a relationship with that murdering drunk, Anderson. He could argue it was a long time ago, but some things could never be forgiven.

He smiled as he pictured their confrontation—Ben's incredulous horror, David's squirming attempts to explain. If Ben had an ounce of sense, he'd send the guy packing. This meant Carl would again have a chance to try to win back his heart.

Sometimes he imagined he'd wake up one morning and realize it had all been a horrible dream. The past several months of loneliness and despair would give way to joyous realization as Ben turned sleepily toward him on the pillows and smiled that wonderful, lopsided smile.

"How could you have left me?" he cried aloud to the empty room. He felt pain like a howl rising at the back of his throat. The recollection of his fist smashing through the wall of his bedroom floated unwelcome into his head, along with Ben's face contorted in fear, as if Carl would strike him next. He was just a man with strong passions! Sometimes the love was so intense it overflowed into other emotions.

Why couldn't Ben have understood a passion like theirs needed its own space to flourish? They didn't need time apart—they needed more time together! If he'd protested about Ben's card games and racquetball dates, it was because a serious

relationship needed to be nurtured. Yes, he would admit he was a jealous guy, but then Ben shouldn't have given him cause to be jealous.

He picked up the TV remote and clicked it on. The DVD was waiting for him like an old friend, a faithful lover. As he pushed the play button, he watched Ben enter the bathroom stall and kneel, looking nervous as he waited on his knees, not certain what was to come. Once upon a time Ben had been his willing, eager lover, ready to try anything to please him. He hadn't asked a lot of questions or refused to comply with the simplest request.

Carl still remembered the thrill of calling his lover at his office and giving him his sexy orders. It had been a stroke of genius to place the tiny camcorder in the toilet paper dispenser. It provided a close-up of Ben's face as he knelt and Carl's thick, hard cock as he'd shoved it into Ben's open mouth.

Carl massaged his shaft as he watched the sordid scene play out as it had a hundred times before. He wondered what Anderson had made of it. When he'd slipped it into his mail slot, Carl had hoped it would humiliate Ben in his new lover's eyes. He would see Ben was just a slut, a dirty queer who sucked off guys in public restrooms. Now however, he regretted sharing it. He should have kept it as his own precious secret, a part of Ben he'd managed to keep and would never give up, no matter how Ben had betrayed him and broken his heart.

He had considered circulating the DVD around Wall Street, but in the end he decided against it. In his heart of hearts he still harbored the dream Ben might someday come back to him. Though Ben had ripped his heart into tatters, leaving him for an uneducated, convicted felon, he still loved him. He still held on to the possibility Ben might tire of David or vice versa, and Ben would remember the hot, perfect passion they had once shared. He would recall how much Carl loved him. He would ache for Carl's kiss, for his embrace, for his cock...

As the faceless man on the screen grabbed Ben's head and began to thrust in release, Carl pulled and stroked his cock, ejaculating at the same time as his image on the screen, though his seed spurted onto his bare thigh instead of into the open, willing mouth of his lover.

Carl was startled by the intercom buzzing by his front door. He glanced at his watch—nine o'clock. Who could it be at this hour? Standing, he closed his bathrobe and tightened the belt as he moved toward the door.

He looked through the peephole as he pressed the intercom button. "Yes?"

"It's David Anderson. Open the door, Carl. We need to talk."

David had thought long and hard about how best to approach the situation. Ben had counseled him to let it go. He said to continue to engage him would only spur him on. At first David accepted this, though he still chafed at the havoc Carl had attempted to introduce into their lives.

Tonight Ben was at a late work meeting. David planned to return to his apartment in Queens after attending the gallery showing of a friend of his. Since he knew the gallery wasn't far from Carl's neighborhood, he decided to pay the man an unexpected visit before going home.

Despite Carl's intent to destroy his relationship with Ben by leaving that article, David had to admit he'd done them a favor. Though he hoped he would have eventually found a way to tell Ben what had happened, Carl had forced the issue. Instead of slowly peeling the layers of his confession from him, he'd dug in and pulled them off all at once, leaving him exposed to the naked truth.

Hidden for so long, it had metastasized like some kind of cancer, eating away at him beneath the surface, crippling his ability to ever truly connect to another human being.

You're only as sick as your secrets.

Ben's words had stayed with him. He'd attempted to blot the entire thing out of his life. Most of the time it wasn't in his conscious mind. He could go days or even weeks without recalling James' sunny smile or his shock of unruly red hair or the blood-splattered, broken body lying on the wet, black asphalt.

Yet the memories were always there, lingering just beyond conscious thought by day, seeping into his dreams at night. It wasn't as if confessing to Ben had expunged the horrible event from his life, but it was somehow easier to bear. Ben hadn't run screaming from the room. He hadn't been outraged or horrified. His response had been compassionate and loving.

But as the days passed, David began to focus on just how insidious, just how invasive and cruel Carl's actions had been. He felt violated. Far more than Carl's fist in his stomach, his leaving the file expressly to cause Ben pain was what really angered David. Who knew what Carl's next move would be? How long should Ben and he continue to turn the other cheek, hoping Carl would finally give up? Did a man like that ever stop?

As he stood waiting for Carl to open the door, he half expected Carl to refuse—to turn off the stoop light or threaten him in some way. Instead he heard the sound of a bolt sliding back and a moment later the door swung open.

Carl's hair was damp, his strong, muscular legs bare beneath a bathrobe. "Come to finish the fight?" he said, his face twisting into a sneer.

"I don't want to fight you," David replied, though he noted with satisfaction the bruise on Carl's jaw. "We need to talk. Your bullying tactics are going to stop."

"Is that a threat?"

"It's a statement of fact." He stood his ground, staring at Carl. "Are you going to let me in?" He readied himself for a slam of the door, his shoulder tingling in anticipation to block it. He *would* say what he'd come to say whether Carl liked it or not. But Carl didn't slam the door. Instead he stepped back and gestured for David to enter.

"Only to keep the neighbors from staring," Carl retorted, stepping back to let David enter.

David stopped just inside the door. "I'll get to the point. Stop harassing Ben and me. Leave us alone."

"Where is Ben? Why isn't he here telling me himself?"

"He's working late. He doesn't know I'm here."

"Working late," Carl repeated, raising his eyebrows. "That's where he *says* he's going. Have you ever followed him to see where he's *really* going?"

"Follow him! Why would I do that? Of course not."

Carl smiled a slow, cruel smile. "No, of course not. You're still in the honeymoon phase. You haven't figured out yet what Ben really is, where he really goes."

"What are you talking about? You're delusional. He warned me —"

"Oh, *did* he? I'm sure he painted a distorted picture of me badgering and stalking him when all he needed was a little 'space'. Well, all I can say is, *I'm* not the one who jerks off strangers in bathroom stalls for cheap thrills."

David felt the blood rising to his face. He found himself longing to smash Carl's face again, this time square in the nose. He controlled himself, aware getting into another fight with the man wasn't productive for anyone.

Instead he clenched and unclenched his fists and took a breath, forcing himself to calm down. He knew Carl was playing mind games, trying to goad him into reacting. "*You* were the guy in the stall, not some stranger, and you know as well as I do he had no idea you were taping what should have been a private moment between the two of you."

"Oh, he told you that, did he?" Carl said, one eyebrow arching in amusement. "That's a clever story, though frankly, I'm surprised he thought so fast on his feet. Usually he blushes and stammers like a girl when confronted with his own lies." David knitted his eyebrows in confusion as Carl went on. "Ben has you fooled but good, just like he fooled me at first. He's a slut, David. A dirty little exhibitionist. He set that camera up himself! He has lots more of those DVDs stashed somewhere, you can be sure. I used to beg him to stop but he wouldn't listen. If nothing else, it was dangerous. He could have been beaten up or arrested or worse. It was like an addiction with him."

"You're lying," David said angrily. "That's a bald-faced lie!" Again his fingers tingled, curling into a fist.

"Is it? Are you so sure? I've known him much longer than you, you know. I still love him, despite his weaknesses, despite his perversions, despite his infidelities."

"You have a strange way of showing it," David retorted.

"Oh, and you show it so well, I suppose. All you've got to offer is your pretty face. He's too good for you. Too good for a loser college dropout. A drunk. A *murderer*."

Only a few days before those words would have slammed into David's psyche like a fist. Yet his confession to Ben had somehow lifted the curse of his own making. He'd

spent years trying to get past the belief he was unworthy of love. Now he knew he no longer had to hold on to even the vestiges of that punitive, self-destructive image of himself. Years had passed. He'd served his time. He could never bring James back, but he himself needn't stay trapped forever in the past like a fly in amber.

He'd made something of himself. He was a successful model and actor, and more importantly, he'd found a man he truly loved and who loved him. Carl would never understand that kind of love, freely given, joyfully received, without strings or limitations.

As he stared at Carl's handsome face, the dark, dangerous eyes, the lips curled in derision, he realized he didn't feel like hitting him anymore. He felt genuinely sorry for the man. He was the loser, compelled to tell vicious lies about someone he professed to love and to strike below the belt regarding David's own past. How lonely, how terrified he must be, David thought.

"It's time to move on. He's not coming back. Get on with your life and leave Ben alone."

"You don't know that!" Carl spat vehemently. "You don't know him like I do! He'll come to his senses, you'll see! He still loves me. He still loves me..." Carl's voice cracked and to David's astonishment he began to cry, snuffling constricted sobs. Abruptly he turned away, walking quickly into a room off the front hall.

David followed him. He'd expected blustering, perhaps threats, but tears! Carl was standing by a bar, pouring whiskey into a tumbler of melting ice. He set the bottle down hard and drank deeply from the glass. Angrily he wiped tears from his face. Turning toward David he said roughly, "Go on. Get out. Run back to Ben so you can laugh about this with him."

David saw Carl's hand was shaking. He watched as Carl poured another several ounces into the glass and drank it in one burning gulp. "Carl, slow down with that whiskey."

"Mind your own business. You've said what you came to say. Now get the fuck out of my house."

* * * * *

Summer had arrived in full force as Sunday morning dawned with the promise of another sticky day. Ben and David had stayed at Ben's place the night before since it was opening night for a new off-Broadway play in which David played the lead. They were sprawled on Ben's bed with the Sunday paper spread open before them. David was nervously scanning the arts and leisure section, searching for reviews of the new play.

He thrust the paper toward Ben. "You look, I can't stand the pressure!" He averted his face with a grimace. Ben laughed and took the paper.

He scanned the page with theater reviews. "Here's one." Aloud, he read, "*Odd Companions*, directed by George Buchanan, featuring David Anderson and a cast of talented players, fairly glitters with emotional intensity. Anderson's superb lead provides the cornerstone for this marvelously original and intimate look at a gay man in crisis. Anderson faced the challenges of the role with honesty and verve, especially in the scenes requiring a light comic touch." Ben stopped reading to grin broadly at David. "I *told* you you were amazing last night!"

"What else does it say?" David said, grinning back in spite of himself. As Ben continued to read the glowing review, David relaxed, lying down with his arms behind his head. Ben was distracted from his reading by David's sexy, bare chest. He finished the review and dropped the paper beside the bed.

"Will you still want me when you're a famous Broadway star?" He snuggled next to David, inhaling his warm, masculine scent.

David laughed. "One good review does not a star make. Just wait until Eliza Stanford gets her digs in. She's notorious for her scathing reviews."

"That *was* Eliza Stanford's review! Didn't I say that?"

David sat up, his mouth open in surprise. "Really?" As Ben nodded, he plopped back down again, shaking his head in disbelief.

"I don't know why you're so surprised. You really were superb. If nothing else, the three curtain calls should have clued you in. I bet your parents are pretty proud of you now, huh?" As Ben said this, he realized David had never talked much about his family. Ben knew he had an older sister, and both she and his parents lived in upstate New York. "What do they think of your acting anyway? Have they ever come down to see you in a show?"

"They don't know I'm an actor."

"They don't know?" Ben was surprised. Though his parents lived in Texas, he still kept in touch with them, visiting at least once or twice a year and talking with them on the phone at least once a month. They were very proud of his career on Wall Street, almost embarrassing him with their enthusiasm.

"I haven't seen or talked to them in nine years."

Nine years. Not since he was eighteen... "David. I had no idea. You haven't seen them since...?"

"Since the trial. They came to the trial and watched, stony-faced, while the jury delivered the sentence. I was eighteen years old and scared out of my wits. My father seemed less upset about the fact I'd killed somebody than that James was described over and over by the prosecutor as my 'homosexual lover'. I was out of jail on bond during the trial and at the dinner table he'd say, 'Margaret, ask the boy if he wants peas.' He wouldn't talk to me directly. It was the strangest feeling. I felt negated. Like I wasn't there or had already died. In some ways it was a relief to go to jail, just to get away from him."

"Did they visit you in prison?"

"My mom did a couple of times. My sister was firmly in my father's camp. Mom tried to explain my father believed homosexuality was an abomination against god. She said he'd come around eventually as I was their only son. Instead I think he found out she was visiting and made her stop."

Ben wrapped his arms around David and held him. "That's horrible, David. And you were so young!"

"Yeah," David's voice was brusque. "You grow up quick in the joint though. Luckily I was strong and so crazed with my own grief nobody messed with me. I shared a cell with a drug addict who had no business being in jail at all—he should have been in treatment. But that's our judicial system for you. Spend hundreds of thousands of dollars locking up people who aren't threats to society. By the time half of them get out of there, they *are* threats, bitter and hardened by the demeaning, harsh life in prison."

"I can't believe you had to go through that. And with no support from your family. What a nightmare." Ben's heart ached for David.

"Well, it's ancient history." He stared into space, but after a moment his face brightened. "Believe it or not, that's where I got my start acting." David turned to smile at Ben. "There was this group of guys that put on plays for the other inmates. Just to distract myself, I signed up to participate. That's when I got the acting bug. Who knows, maybe if I'd stayed in school, I would have become an accountant or a history teacher."

"And deprived Eliza Stanford and the rest of us of your 'glittering emotional intensity' or whatever it was she said."

David laughed and cuffed Ben's head playfully. He threw a pillow at him and Ben retaliated in kind. Soon they were tussling and wrestling like kids until David got the upper hand, pinning Ben beneath him with a knee on either arm.

He looked down at Ben, a smile playing at his lips. Ben stared up at him, looking past the classic good looks to the hint of pain still whispering behind his eyes. There was a certain maturity in his face born from suffering perhaps that kept him from being too "pretty" as Carl had so scathingly referred to him. The pain didn't define him, but it was always there, lingering just below the wide, sunny smiles and tender looks he saved just for Ben.

David leaned down, closing his eyes as he parted his lips for a kiss. Ben responded, still pinned to the bed beneath his sexy lover. David shifted to lie flat, his weight heavy and comforting over Ben. He could feel David's cock hardening against him beneath his underwear. He knew his own cock was responding in kind.

David slid off Ben and Ben leaned toward him, not wanting the kiss to stop. David's eyes were hooded with lust. He pulled at his underwear, sliding it past his hips. Ben's mouth watered at the sight of his erect shaft. He swiveled on the bed, pulling off his own and kicking it away.

Greedily he reached for David's cock, sucking it into his mouth without his usual teasing licks and kisses. He was ravenous for his lover, aching to taste him. Grabbing

David's hips, he pulled him closer, taking him deep into his throat. He felt David's hot mouth on his shaft as well, urgently licking and suckling him in kind.

Tongues, cocks, fingers, bodies—they became lost in each other, a fusion of passion and lust. Each stroke, each kiss, sent them closer to a shared orgasm. Ben held on to David's hips, forgetting to breathe, his mind shut down, his entire body focused on the giving and receiving of pleasure. David's ardent response fueled Ben's arousal and in minutes they were careening together into shattering orgasm. Still they held each other, their bodies slick with sweat, their hearts beating hard and finally slowing in rhythm.

They fell apart at last, each rolling to his back. Ben felt himself drifting slowly in and out of sleep. Lazily he reached out to touch David's thigh. He realized at that moment there was no place on earth he'd rather be than in bed with David resting beside him.

How long would it last?

They'd talked about their past relationships. While Ben had been serially monogamous, dating only one guy at a time, though rarely for longer than six months, David had confided he'd often played the field—dating several guys at once and not wanting to get tied down for too long to one man. A month, two or three at the most, and he was, to use his words, "outta there".

An unwelcome thought slipped into Ben's drifting mind. They'd been together for three months now and as far as Ben knew, David wasn't seeing anyone else. They spent just about every night together and every weekend as well. Was Ben nearing the end of David's commitment rope? How soon before he cut Ben loose, either through boredom or fear of commitment?

Ben suspected fear played a larger role in David's unwillingness to commit than he might care to admit or even know. Being responsible for the death of his first lover had to have shaken his trust in love to the core. While Ben fervently hoped he could be the one to help David over that hurdle, he knew things didn't always turn out like the romance novels he sometimes enjoyed reading.

As he stroked David's smooth thigh, he resisted the impulse to say, "Don't leave me, David. Ever."

Instead he said, "I'm getting hungry."

"Me too," David responded, pulling himself into a sitting position. "Listen, Ben, I have something to tell you." Ben's stomach lurched. He waited with fatalistic calm. David's next words took him totally by surprise.

"I saw Carl last week. I meant to tell you sooner but with the rehearsals and the opening Saturday night, I just never found the right moment."

"Where did you see him? He didn't try to come back to my apartment, did he?"

"No. No, actually I went to his place."

"You what?"

"Yeah. It was the night you had to work late. I was at a friend's gallery opening and I realized it wasn't far from where Carl lived. I decided to stop by and give the guy a piece of my mind. The more I thought about what he's done to try and wreck our relationship, the angrier I became. I decided I would just go over there and tell him to knock it off."

Ben peered closely at David's face. "Did you guys get into a fight again?"

"No, though I have to admit, I wanted to punch him out a couple of times, but I knew that wasn't the answer to anything. He insulted and slandered you on the one hand while professing his undying love for you on the other. It was all rather peculiar until I realized how drunk he was. I left him drinking what looked like enough to send himself into a coma." David sighed heavily. "I think he really did love you in his way, but his need to control and his deep insecurities prevented him from expressing that love in a healthy way. I hope he finally figures out he's out of the loop for good. I'm sure not going away anytime soon."

Anytime soon... Ben stared at David, wondering if he spoke with intent or was just using a catchphrase. David continued. "I don't think you have anything to worry about with that DVD. I think he's going to leave us alone going forward."

"I hope you're right. Sometimes I feel like such a jerk. I can't believe I thought I was in love with him."

"Love is like that sometimes. We want it so much we think we've found it, only to realize it wasn't love at all but some other emotion masquerading as love."

"What about us?" Ben said softly.

David, who had arisen from the bed and was pulling on his clothes, turned back toward Ben. "What? I didn't hear you."

"Nothing."

Chapter Ten

"How does it feel to be an overnight success?"

David shook his head with a laugh. "Mr. Kensington, I've been doing this for seven years. If that's considered overnight..."

"In this business it is. And please, call me Nigel." Nigel scribbled something on the pad in front of him and looked back toward David. "You're only, what, twenty-six, twenty-seven?"

"Twenty-seven," David replied. He was sitting with a man of about thirty-five whom he had known by reputation but had never met until today. They had just ordered breakfast at a fancy French café in midtown. Nigel Kensington had invited him, courtesy of his magazine. He penned a very influential column for a local theater magazine called *The Scene*.

David had been thrilled when he'd returned home Monday morning to discover the journalist's message on his answering machine. The voice was clipped and British, very posh, David thought. He'd never seen a picture of Kensington, but his voice had conjured the image of a Hugh Grant sort of Brit with dark hair and a ready, gleaming smile.

Instead, sitting across from him was a stocky man with a barrel chest and powerful forearms. His face was rugged and tan, making his light blue eyes blaze out of his face like a leaping fire beneath a shock of white-blond hair. He exuded a kind of raw sensuality that aroused David. He couldn't help but wonder if the man were gay. Not that it mattered – his heart belonged to Ben. Still, a man could look...

As their food arrived, Nigel continued to ask questions typical of any interview, about David's prior acting experience and his aspirations for the future. He took notes on his pad, nodding as David answered.

"I've seen you in a few other plays," Nigel commented as their plates were cleared and more coffee poured. "But your performance in *Odd Companions* really made me sit up and take notice. You've got something, David. It's not just those GQ good looks. No offense, but they're a dime a dozen. No, it's a certain quality. When I was watching you, I wasn't thinking about what a good acting job you were doing. I was watching something *real*. The pain, the angst and suffering you were able to bring to the role – that doesn't spring from nowhere." He gazed intently at David, who didn't respond.

Softly Nigel said, "What happened to you? How can such a young guy find that sort of expression unless it's from something in your own life?"

David shifted in his seat, uncomfortable with this line of questioning. "I don't know what you mean. It's called acting. That's the point, isn't it? To make it real. To live it for the moments you're on the stage."

Nigel continued to scrutinize him a while longer. Finally he said, "Yes. Yes, I suppose so. Forgive me if I overstepped."

Later that afternoon while grocery shopping for the meal he planned to cook for Ben that evening, David couldn't get Nigel Kensington out of his head. They'd lingered quite a while over breakfast. Nigel was no longer taking notes. They had simply begun talking about various things such as the state of the theater today in Britain compared to the States and how few good plays there were out there with gay characters. Nigel hadn't come out and said he was gay, but David knew by the end of their conversation he was. He also knew Nigel was attracted to him.

Once Nigel had paid the bill and they were preparing to leave, he had said, "Perhaps we can meet again? I think I've got what I need for the article, but I'd love to continue our conversation where we left off." He flashed a smile and raised his eyebrows. "That is, if you're not taken."

David had laughed, aware he was blushing slightly as he shook his head and lied, "I'm not taken." The image of Ben had slipped into his mind's eye—that sweet, sunny smile, his crooked nose and lovely hazel eyes, which regarded him with silent reproach. "That is," he amended. "I am kind of seeing someone. But we're not joined at the hip or anything."

And so he had done it. Wasn't this how it always started? His eye would begin to rove. The opportunity for something new would present itself. It wasn't that he sought out other men—they just seemed to appear at the right moment. He would meet them for coffee, pretending to himself there was no ulterior motive. The guy he was seeing somewhat steadily at the time wouldn't know a thing for a while until David began to withdraw emotionally. Eventually he would start to make excuses for breaking dates, slowly seeing less and less of the guy.

It wasn't that David planned it like this. He just didn't have what it took to sustain a relationship, he supposed. He rarely broke things off directly. Usually his current lover would eventually get the picture and fade away, though sometimes they'd force the issue with an unpleasant scene. Either way it left David free to pursue his latest interest without being tied down.

David shook his head, silently admonishing himself. Ben wasn't just some guy he'd been casually dating! They were practically living together! They were in love! David had told Ben things he'd never shared with anyone on the planet. Ben was the first man he'd felt close enough to, to finally confide about James. He felt he could literally trust Ben with his life.

And then there was the sex! Ben was so hot in bed, so passionate and sexy. David's cock stirred at the memory of Ben's hot mouth wrapped around his shaft and the hard press of his thick cock as he made love to David like no one ever had before.

Why in the world would David even *think* about another guy, much less agree to meet him for a drink? David didn't even drink! He hadn't had a drink since... David shook his head as Nigel Kensington's face slid into his mind's eye with his blazing eyes and dangerous smile. He'd been flattered by the journalist's attention and praise of his work.

Was it so surprising Nigel and he should have gotten along so well? They were both passionate about the theater. Nigel was knowledgeable and funny, sharing stories and gossip about certain directors and producers that had made David laugh until his sides ached. He'd asked questions about David's work that showed he had followed David's career, as modest as it was to that point. He'd made David feel special and important.

Despite himself, he began to fantasize about the two of them together. He could picture Nigel naked, like a hungry bear pulling David into his strong arms before pushing him to the floor to have his way... He shook his head to clear the image.

It wasn't as if they were meeting for sex, for god's sake! They'd simply agreed to meet again sometime to "continue their conversation". There was no crime in that surely? After all, it wasn't as if he'd denied Ben's existence. He'd admitted he was seeing someone.

Kind of seeing someone. But we're not joined at the hip. David felt a rush of shame at his betrayal. For that was what it was, disguise it as he might, and he knew it. By not admitting to Nigel he was in fact seeing someone, not *kind* of seeing him, and they were in love, he'd left the door open—wide open—for Nigel to push through if he chose.

His cell phone vibrated in his pocket and David pulled it out. Ben's office number showed on the display screen. "Hi, Ben!" David said, his voice perhaps over-bright.

"Hi, David. I just got out of a meeting. I was wondering how your interview went this morning with *The Scene*."

"Oh! It went really well. The food at *La Maison* was great. I got these delicious orange crepes and Nigel had a pastry thing that looked really good. The coffee was very strong but I liked it. We should go sometime. Nigel Kensington was really nice. I was kind of nervous since his column carries a lot of weight in the theater community. But he was pleasant and easy to talk to. I hope the article comes out okay. He didn't record us or anything. He just took notes." David was speaking rapidly, aware he was babbling.

Ben laughed and interjected, "Sounds like it was great! I'm glad you had a good time. You certainly deserve the recognition you're getting for this role, David. I'm so proud of you."

David sighed inaudibly. "Thanks, Ben."

"I've got to run. See you tonight?"

* * * * *

Ben glanced at his watch. It had been a long day. He was looking forward to getting home and seeing David. Their brief phone conversation earlier in the day lingered in his mind, leaving him with a vague sense of unease he couldn't quite define. They rarely talked much during the course of the day. Neither was much of a phone conversationalist, and Ben was often in and out of meetings or too busy to chat. David's schedule was erratic with photo shoots for his modeling jobs at different times of the day and auditions and rehearsals at all hours.

Still, he'd expected David to call right after the interview and had been surprised when he hadn't. From the sound of things, it had gone well, so why was Ben uneasy? David had sounded so excited on the phone when he mentioned this Nigel Kensington person. Ben swiveled toward his computer and did a quick search on the name coupled with the name of the magazine. Up popped a photo of the man, his rugged charisma captured by the lens. It wasn't that he was precisely handsome, but one wanted to keep looking at his face, at those brilliant eyes and the curve of a mouth at once sensual and cruel. Ben began to read the biographic information on him, which was impressive. "British, huh. I wonder if he's gay..."

* * * * *

David didn't recognize the number on his cell phone. "Hello?"

"David. I hope I didn't catch you at a bad time?" David felt his face heat as he realized it was Nigel, his voice rich and deep and deliciously British. Ben, who was sitting in his favorite reading chair with a book, glanced up. David smiled nervously at him and stood, taking the cell phone into the kitchen.

"No, no. It's fine. What can I do for you?" he said, lowering his voice.

"Oh lots, I'd imagine," Nigel laughed. "But right now I just need a few moments of your time. I hope you don't mind my calling your cell." They had exchanged business cards as they'd parted that morning. "I tried your home number first but got your machine."

"No, that's fine. I've got plenty of minutes on my phone. I hardly ever use it. What did you need?" David realized Ben had followed him into the kitchen. He was at the refrigerator, pulling out a can of his beloved Dr. Pepper.

"I just wanted to clarify a few points from this morning. If you have a moment, it won't take long."

"Oh. Sure. Go ahead." David glanced at Ben, who was looking at him as he popped the lid of his soda and took a drink. "It's Nigel Kensington," David mouthed silently toward him. Ben watched him a moment longer and then turned and left the kitchen, leaving David to sit at the table and elaborate on a few remarks he'd made at breakfast.

When he hung up, he returned to the living room. "That was Nigel," he repeated. "He had a few more questions to round out his article. He's going to send me a preview

copy of it online because he needs to hand it in by tomorrow afternoon and he wants to make sure he has all his facts straight." David found himself annoyed at Ben's hangdog expression. It wasn't as if he were lying! Why did he feel as if he were? Almost aggressively he said, "I gave him your email address, the one printed on your card that I keep in my wallet. I hope that's okay."

Ben answered pleasantly, "Sure, no problem. That's my work email but we can access it from here too." David realized he was probably imagining Ben's disapproving expression and he felt contrite. Ben added, "You know, we can set up an email account for you on this computer. You're here all the time anyway. Would you like your own account?"

"Yeah, I guess that would be good. It's about time I entered the twenty-first century, right?" He grinned, recalling how surprised Ben had been to learn he had no computer or even an email account for access at an Internet café. Always on a budget, a computer had seemed like an extravagance he couldn't afford, and never having had one, he didn't miss it.

"Come on, I'll show you how to do it."

They sat side by side in front of Ben's computer. Ben showed David how to access his work email from the apartment and then how to set up his own account. "Now," Ben said, "you need to choose a password that's easy to remember."

"That's easy, I'll pick—"

"No," Ben said, putting his fingers over David's lips. "You don't tell anyone. Not even me. It's your own private account. I wouldn't read your email, just like I wouldn't read your personal letters, unless of course you showed them to me."

David nodded soberly, but then said, "But you just told me your work email password."

"Oh." Ben waved a hand. "That's different. All I get in there are assignments from my bosses and junk mail."

And he'd be getting Nigel's email.

David felt a cold finger of anxiety slide across his innards. Of course Nigel had only said he'd be emailing the article, but what if the email said more? He hadn't wanted Nigel to think he was unsophisticated, so he'd pretended Ben's email address was his. What a stupid, risky thing to do! Did he *want* to sabotage their relationship?

This was why he avoided getting too close in the first place, he realized, annoyance again sliding up to cover his guilt. He didn't want to have to always be watching out for someone's feelings, checking his every move to make sure it didn't upset his lover. Even as he thought this, he knew it wasn't fair. Ben had never hovered over him or asked him to account for his time when they weren't together. If anything, he'd been the one who seemed more anxious to be with Ben than vice versa. For some reason this annoyed him as well—he was definitely not used to being the "needy" one in a relationship, if that was what he was. No, of course he wasn't. David would never permit himself to be put in that position. He was being ridiculous.

He glanced sidelong at Ben, who was busy clicking away at the computer, unaware of the turmoil in David's head and heart. The troubling issue of Nigel's email still remained. David knew suddenly what he would do. The second Ben left for the office in the morning, he'd log on to Ben's email account and see if Nigel had sent anything. He would read the article and delete the email and that would be that. If by some chance Nigel said something indiscreet in the body of the email, Ben would be none the wiser.

"Check this out," Ben said with a sly grin. He leaned back so David could see. Two naked, muscular men, their skin oiled and tan, appeared on the screen. One crouched on his hands and knees as the other moved behind him, his long, thick cock hard in his hand as he began to guide it toward the other's ass. Abruptly the trailer ended.

"Hey," David said, "I was just getting into that."

Ben laughed. "It's just a clip. A teaser to get you to buy a membership to their site so you can watch this stuff all night long for only \$19.95." He turned to David. "I'd much rather have the real thing, wouldn't you?"

David nodded, all thoughts of email and intrigue flying from his head as he lost himself in Ben's clear hazel eyes, shining green now in the light of the computer monitor. The lingering memory of Nigel's beckoning stare dissolved as Ben leaned toward him for a kiss.

* * * * *

Ben left for the office the next morning, David still asleep in his bed. When he had settled in at his desk, armed with a cup of steaming coffee, half of which would end up cold in the cup by midmorning, he flicked on his computer and turned to examine the contents of his inbox, separating the pressing documents from those he could handle later.

Next he checked his email, scrolling down the unread messages to open the ones from Janet and his other boss Marvin to see what lay in store for the day.

As he sipped his coffee, he thought about last night. About how David seemed almost embarrassed when the call came from Nigel on his cell. Ben hadn't wanted to think anything of it, yet he couldn't help but feel as if David were hiding something. Guys probably came on to David every day of the week. It went with the territory of his job as a model and actor, and he *was* devastatingly good-looking. David claimed to be impervious to it all, but maybe Nigel Kensington was too hot to pass by.

Don't let there be something going on, he prayed silently.

Surely it was just his imagination. He'd only had breakfast with the guy. A business breakfast. He hadn't said a word about Nigel even being gay! For all Ben knew, Nigel Kensington had a wife and three children. This thought cheered him and he relaxed, taking another sip of rapidly cooling coffee.

David couldn't have made love to him last night the way he did if he was losing interest. Could he? He thought back to their very first talks together, before they had

fallen in love. David had candidly admitted back then he rarely stayed with a guy for longer than a few months. He had said something about not being ready to settle down with one guy. Ben, at the time, had agreed.

But one month had melted into two and then three, and as far as Ben could see, their relationship only seemed to get stronger. Why would David do something like mess around with some guy he'd just met? It didn't make sense. Ben knew he was just being paranoid. He was acting like Carl, for god's sake, jumping to conclusions based on little more than a facial expression and a gut reaction.

Feeling better, Ben began to delete the junk emails he wouldn't even bother to open. He clicked too quickly on one he'd meant to read first. Clicking on the deleted items folder, he found the email and sent it back to his inbox. By chance his eye caught a subject header he hadn't recalled sending to the delete folder.

David Anderson—The Inside Story. He looked at the return address and saw it was from N.Kensington@thescene.com. Why had it been deleted? Had David awoken in the middle of the night to retrieve email? Or perhaps this morning while Ben was on the way to work? He looked at the time the email had arrived—6:30 a.m. So David must have opened it this morning. Why delete it? Ben again shook away the thought David might be hiding something.

Thought it was sent to my account, that's still his personal email, he told himself. Opening it is no different than going into his private email account or reading his personal letters. He turned resolutely away from the computer screen and tried to focus on his tasks for the day. Repeatedly his eye was drawn back to the screen he'd left open, the deleted email beckoning him like a devil whispering into his ear.

Finally, unable to resist the temptation any longer, Ben opened the email, aware as he did so things between them might never be the same.

He scanned the words quickly before reading them a second and then a third time.

Dearest David,

I did so enjoy our breakfast. Attached is the final article for your review. I think you'll be pleased with it. Please give me a call with your okay no later than noon as I have deadlines to meet.

On a more personal note, I can't seem to get the thought of you out of my head. I'm so glad you're interested in seeing me again. I was wondering if you'd care to join me for a drink this evening, or if that isn't convenient, perhaps another time? I do so look forward to getting to know you better. Much, much better.

Love, Nigel

Ben sat in stunned silence for several minutes. This couldn't be happening. He felt a pain in his chest and realized it was his heart, cracking along a fault line of despair.

He worked through lunch, his mind on autopilot as he poured over financial statements, newspaper articles and data culled from the Internet for his latest project. The words in Nigel's email had burned themselves into his memory despite his attempts to forget them. A phrase would whisper its way past the numbers and facts on which he was attempting to focus...*was wondering if you'd care to join me... I'm so glad... Much, much better...*

They'd never explicitly said they wouldn't see other guys. Their connection had been forged so quickly and so intensely, it simply hadn't occurred to Ben such a discussion was necessary. Perhaps now was the time for such a talk?

Ben didn't want to turn into Carl, obsessing over where David went, how he spent his time and who he spent it with. Perhaps he was reading more into that email than was intended. Or perhaps there was interest but only on Kensington's part. There was no reason to assume the worst of David! Shouldn't one think the best of one's lover? David had never given him reason before to question or doubt him.

It suddenly occurred to Ben as he sat there that David might have answered the email. Quickly he tapped the keys on his keyboard, opening his email and clicking on the sent folder. He scrolled down for the cursed subject line containing David's name but found nothing. He wasn't sure if he was relieved or not. At least if David had replied, he would have known definitively one way or the other what David's true intentions were.

For all he knew, David might have never stopped seeing other guys, at least on a casual basis. How would Ben be the wiser? After all, David's days were unstructured compared to Ben's. In the fifty or so hours Ben spent at the office each week, not to mention his Wednesday night poker game and the periodic racquetball games, there was plenty of time for David to see whoever he wanted. Ben's mind flashed back to the naked men who adorned the walls of David's studio apartment, each better-looking than the last. He'd assured Ben none of them were lovers but perhaps he had only been protecting Ben? Or lying to protect himself...

Ben stood from his desk, no longer even pretending to analyze the information scattered there. He pushed his hands through his hair and turned to stare out at the hazy city skyline. He was going to make himself crazy. Instead of obsessing about this, he should just talk to David. Straightforward and simple.

Yes. He would just ask him what, if anything, there was between him and Nigel. Even as he thought this however, he could hear Carl, his voice bitter with accusation as he questioned Ben endlessly about where he'd *really* been, who he'd *really* been with and what he'd *really* been doing. Ben had found himself responding defensively, which to Carl, was proof of his guilt.

He didn't want to put David or himself in that position. He had to trust David. He would trust David. And he would give him the space Carl had denied him. He would treat David as he wished Carl had treated him. He would mind his own business and leave the deleted email unmentioned.

When Ben arrived home that evening at 6:45, instead of David there to greet him, he found a note on the hall table.

Lasagna is in the oven. Just cook it another fifteen minutes at 350 degrees. Nigel Kensington needed to see me one more time about this article thing. I should be home no later than ten. Love you, David.

Still holding the note, Ben moved to a chair and sank down into it. Why hadn't David just called him? Why the note? Were they really meeting for business—or for pleasure? *I was wondering if you'd care to join me for a drink this evening...*

"Ah, David," Ben said sadly. "Is this the beginning of the end?"

Chapter Eleven

From the entrance, David looked around the dimly lit, trendy club, craning to see Nigel in the crowd. "I'm sorry, sir," a very pretty young woman holding a clipboard said to him. "We're at maximum capacity. Unless you're with someone?"

David glanced down at her. The place didn't look all that full to him. "Nigel Kensington. I'm meeting him here at seven."

The woman consulted her clipboard with a frown. After a moment her face brightened into a smile. "Ah, yes. You must be David Anderson? Mr. Kensington is expecting you. Right this way, sir." David shrugged as he followed her. Nigel must be one of the elite who could get into restaurants and clubs mere mortals such as himself could not. He followed the hostess, aware that sort of thing meant a lot to some people. He'd never particularly cared where he ate or met friends as long as the food was good and the atmosphere pleasant.

"David!" Nigel was seated at a small table near the center of the room. He was wearing a tailored cream-colored silk suit with a royal blue collarless shirt beneath it. David, in rumpled brown linen pants and a white, three-quarter-sleeve cotton T-shirt, felt distinctly underdressed.

Nigel stood and gave David air kisses on either cheek before sitting down and waving toward a chair with a flourish. He leaned forward, saying, "The waiting list to get in this place is a mile long. But I know Andre, one of the owners." He sat back expectantly.

David knew he was supposed to be impressed. "That's lucky," he offered lamely. Suddenly he thought of Ben, probably home by now, greeted by a note and a lasagna in the oven but no David.

Why had he agreed to meet Nigel? At the time he'd received the email early this morning, it had seemed like a good idea. Something exciting and slightly risqué. After all, he hadn't been lying when he had said Ben and he weren't joined at the hip! He didn't need to report his every move to Ben. They'd probably been overdoing it lately anyway. It would be good for their relationship to pull back a bit. To bring back the edge of uncertainty that kept things fresh and alive.

And it wasn't as if he were sneaking away for an illicit affair! It wasn't as if he'd lied about where he was going. He had told Ben in the note he was going to see Nigel again. He had fudged the reason for meeting though. The article was already complete and handed in for publication. But Ben didn't know that. It was a good thing he'd seen the email and gotten rid of it before Ben saw it. No point in hurting him after all. And what he didn't know...

Even as this thought passed through David's mind, he knew the old adage wasn't true, at least not in matters of the heart. Secrets killed a relationship. "David?" Nigel put his hand on David's arm, startling him. He realized a waiter was standing patiently in front of him, waiting for his order. Nigel grinned. "You seem to be lost in a fog. Are you all right?"

"Yes, I'm sorry. I was distracted about something. I'm fine."

"I was saying they make a wonderful blue martini."

"What's a blue martini?"

Nigel glanced toward the waiter, who answered with a slightly condescending air, "It's got Blue Curacao and twists of orange and lemon. Oh and vodka of course."

"Packs a lovely wallop. Shall we make it two?" Nigel said softly. Though his words seemed innocuous enough, David felt a strong sexual undercurrent emanating from Nigel. His charismatic appeal was undeniable, those fire-blue eyes catching and holding David's own until he forced himself to look away.

"No thanks. I think I'll just have a club soda with lime." Nigel raised his eyebrows but said nothing.

As they waited for their drinks Nigel began to discuss the interview article. "My editor was very enthusiastic. You might find yourself as a feature next week."

"That's terrific. I really appreciate it, Nigel."

Nigel again lightly touched his forearm, his fingers a lingering invitation. David looked up into his eyes, knowing as he did so he would be caught in their burning, sensual gaze. Nigel seemed to be sizing him up as he gazed hungrily at David. He reminded David suddenly of a lion, all coiled energy and power, ready to pounce on his prey.

This was the moment. The moment he either looked away or gave Nigel his slow, easy smile, the smile that said, *I want you. I know you want me.*

How many times had David bestowed that smile? How many more men would he seduce, using his looks to get what he wanted, or what he thought he wanted at the moment? How many more times would he wake up in someone's bed, a near-stranger asleep next to him, wondering why he was there?

Yet Nigel wasn't just anyone. He was an influential player in the somewhat insulated New York theater community. Who knew what doors he might open for David? Not only that, he was sexy, from his rugged masculine features to his beautifully modulated, British-accented voice to his broad-shouldered physique in tailored silk.

David held Nigel's gaze a moment longer.

And then he looked away.

* * * * *

David knocked on Ben's apartment door, using the special two-short, one-long rap to let Ben know it was him. Usually he could hear Ben call out to him to come in, but he heard nothing. With a slight shrug he used his key and opened the door. Ben wasn't in the living room.

"Ben?"

Silence. David looked around the room, a bubble of panic rising and bursting in his gut. "Ben?" He walked into the kitchen. The lasagna had been removed from the oven but was untouched on the stove. The kitchen was empty. He walked into the bedroom, which was also empty, but now he could hear the sound of running water. He knocked on the bathroom door and called out, "Ben?"

"That you, David?"

With a sigh of relief, David pushed open the door, entering the bathroom. Ben was in the shower, and from the amount of steam billowing into the room, probably had been for a while. "Yeah. We got done earlier than I thought."

In fact they'd been done quite a bit earlier. David had found himself becoming increasingly uncomfortable as he sat with Nigel, listening to the man hold forth about the theater and the people he knew. Though David couldn't quite put his finger on it, Nigel's words had seemed to have a subtext rife with sexual innuendo and expectation.

Nigel had urged him repeatedly to try his blue martini, saying it was just the thing to help him relax. As he'd ordered and finished his second one, he'd become increasingly overt about his intentions, dropping his hand to David's thigh for a lingering squeeze or trying to catch his eye for a smoldering stare. David, aware of what he was doing, tried to head him off by repeatedly changing the subject and pretending not to get the cues.

Finally Nigel had said, "You need to loosen up, David. You're wound tight as a spring. Is something bothering you? Having second thoughts about meeting me tonight?" He had cocked his head, the smile not quite reaching his eyes as he said, "Is that fellow with whom you're *not* joined at the hip less than happy about our little get-together? Is that what this is about?"

"Look. I'm really sorry. I'm afraid I'm not good company tonight." Nigel had made a few more halfhearted attempts, but finally he let David go with a shrug, as if to say, "Win some, lose some". When David turned back at the exit door to offer an apologetic wave, he saw Nigel had already moved to another man's table. The man was speaking, gesturing emphatically with his hands. Nigel threw back his head and laughed, David no doubt already forgotten.

"I'll be out in a minute," Ben called. David closed the bathroom door and lay down on the bed to wait. Once he'd left the club, he'd meant to go straight to Ben's. Instead he'd found himself wandering the crowded, brightly lit Manhattan streets, his hands shoved deep in his pockets, his mind whirling with confused thoughts. He needed Ben to help him sort it through, he realized, aware of the irony of the situation.

The fact he'd even looked at Nigel for a moment and fantasized about being with him had deeply troubled him. He realized he was once again falling into his old patterns of pulling away, diverting himself with someone new when things became too serious. As he lay waiting, he wondered how much he should tell Ben and what damage it might cause between them.

Ben came into the bedroom, a towel wrapped around his waist, his hair wetly curling down his neck. His skin was flushed from the hot shower, his eyes tending toward gray. He sat on the bed next to David, who looked into his sweet, familiar face as he tried to think what to say. He wanted to cry, "I almost did something stupid! And I lied to you. I'm sorry. I love you." But a lifetime of keeping himself back, of holding his real feelings in, kept him from doing so.

Instead he said, "You didn't eat."

"No. Did you?"

David realized he had not. He'd been so wound up all day he had barely eaten a thing. Perhaps that explained why he felt a little dizzy, his stomach twisted into an empty knot. "No, I had to meet—"

"Nigel Kensington, to work on the article," Ben finished for him, standing and moving toward his bureau.

"Yes. I mean, no. I mean..." He blew out a breath and bit his lip. He watched as Ben pulled on soft cotton lounging pants and a T-shirt.

Ben turned back toward him, his face curiously blank. "When you do figure out what you mean, let me know." He turned and walked out. David lay a moment longer, stung by the harsh tone in Ben's voice. Slowly he sat up, swinging his legs over the side of the bed and standing.

He walked through the living room into the kitchen where Ben stood at the counter, tossing salad with large wooden spoons. "I thought this would go well with your lasagna," he offered.

He placed the salad bowl on the table and moved to the cabinets to get plates and glasses. David brought the lasagna to the table. They brushed one another in passing and David turned in toward Ben, who turned away.

Silently they completed preparations for their meal and sat down across from one another. The comfortable familiarity of preparing to eat together was painfully juxtaposed with the tension between them of things unspoken. David felt the weight of it like stones on his heart. How he longed for the lightness of just a few days before. He had to get it back. He *would* get it back.

"Ben, I have something to say."

Ben interrupted. "The email. I saw it."

"You saw...?" *How could he have seen it?* "But I deleted it."

Ben shook his head, a smile playing on his lips despite the pain still lingering in his eyes. "David, you must be the only guy under age sixty who doesn't know how email

works. Think of it like a trash can. When you throw something out, it's still in the trash until it's picked up. You put that email in the trash. When I got to work, I just happened to open the deleted items folder and I saw your name in the subject header. It caught my eye. I wasn't going to open it. That was my mistake. It was none of my business. I have no real excuse, except a premonition you were keeping something from me. I guess I was right." He said the words softly, not with accusation but with sorrow.

David sat still, digesting the fact Ben had seen the email. "I don't know what to say."

"How about the truth? That's what we need between us. Not secrets."

David wanted to confide in Ben; he was desperate to do so but afraid. Though he hadn't actually done anything with Nigel, the intent had been there on some level. But he knew Ben was right. If he tried to clean this up, to pretend there had been nothing to it, he would be adding bricks to the wall rising between them.

"What's going on, David?" Ben said gently. "You can tell me. I'm not going to run away. Talk to me. Don't shut me out from what's going on between you and Nigel. I'm tough. I can take it."

"Nothing is going on between us! Nothing. I don't even think this was about him. Not directly. It's just," he paused, trying to phrase it in a way that wouldn't hurt Ben—or hurt as little as possible. "It's me. I don't know if I can be with just one person, I mean exclusively. No, that isn't what I mean. I love you. I do. I'm just not used to..." How did he say he wasn't used to letting someone in, to letting someone get right up next to his heart? He stared at Ben with a mute appeal.

Ben looked at David's pained expression and felt his own heart ache with sympathy and love. He knew David might have met Nigel for reasons other than he'd said in the note and may have had sexual intentions toward him, but he'd come back to Ben, obviously upset and wanting to talk.

When Ben read the note, he'd tried to go about his evening as he would have if David were merely at a rehearsal or otherwise engaged. He tried not to recall how appealing Nigel Kensington was in the online photo he'd seen, or the fact David had lied to him in his note and hidden the email from him.

For the first time, he had a real sense of what Carl must have gone through those nights when he thought Ben was out fooling around with someone from the poker game or meeting someone on the sly instead of jogging or playing racquetball as he'd claimed.

Though Ben had not in fact lied to Carl, he realized now Carl's pain had been no less acute. He himself had proof, because of that email, that David wasn't being completely upfront with him. Still, he tried to keep his mind from going to the worst possible place, tried to blot out images of David locked in an embrace with Nigel, their hands roaming feverishly over each other's bodies as they pulled off their clothing, tumbling into Nigel's bed while Ben waited at home, the cuckold, the fool.

He tried to tell himself perhaps Nigel really had needed to touch base about the article. Maybe some point had come up and the editor had sent it back, asking for clarification. In his gut though, he didn't believe it. All the cues pointed to something clandestine, something sexual.

He'd forced himself to heat the lasagna, knowing he should eat something. When the timer rang, he had heaved himself from his chair and removed it from the oven. He had stared at the lasagna, perfectly cooked with a hearty meat sauce and melted cheeses but found he had no appetite. He tried to review some reports he'd brought home from the office, but the words made no sense. After reading the same few sentences several times, he put the material back in his briefcase and stared out the window.

His body felt heavy, leaden with the potential of loss. David had become so important so quickly he didn't know how he would deal with David's drifting out of his life. He admonished himself to stop going immediately to the negative. David would come home—eventually—and they would talk. He wouldn't allow this to come between them, or if it did, at least he would understand what had happened and why. Relationships didn't operate on autopilot. They took work.

Feeling resolute, he'd decided to take a nice, hot shower. He took his time, letting the hot spray wash over him, wishing it could wash away his anxiety. He shaved, washed his body, lathered his hair and stood again, eyes closed, face lifted to the spray, letting it soothe him.

When he'd heard David knocking on the bathroom door and calling his name, he'd been at once relieved and scared. Had David come to confess he'd met someone new? That there was no place in his life for Ben Richman any longer?

He knew he'd come across as cold as he entered the bedroom and dressed. Actually seeing David had given him pause. It made him angry to think David had put him through this horrible day of self-doubt and fear. What other secrets was David still keeping? When, if ever, would he trust Ben enough to be completely honest in all of their interactions?

"Talk to me," Ben finally said. "We can work through whatever is going on between us."

David swallowed and said, "You read the email. So you know Nigel invited me for a drink, not to work on that article." Ben nodded, trying to keep the image of the two men leaning forward intimately over a small table out of his mind. "I guess I was flattered by his attention. He's influential in the theater community and he has this certain kind of charismatic charm that kind of takes you off guard." He paused, formulating his thoughts. "I haven't gone this long without seeing more than one guy since, well, ever, I guess." His voice took on a slightly defensive tone as he added, "It's not like we swore we'd never see anyone else."

His words cut into Ben's heart. He tried to keep his voice calm as he replied, "You don't need my permission for anything, David. You're a free man, free to do as you like."

At once David sounded contrite. "God, I'm sorry. That was a stupid thing to say. You've never bugged me about where I'm going. I should have been upfront. I shouldn't have lied to you, even by omission. I don't know what I was thinking. I love you. I love *you*, Ben."

Ben drank in the last words but didn't respond in kind. He felt as if they were walking on a tightrope over dangerous waters. If he could just get them across it, they'd be okay.

Gently he said, "So what happened? Did you meet him at a bar?"

"Yeah. It was some exclusive club in midtown. Chez something or other. The hostess didn't even want to let me in until I mentioned Nigel's name." Ben smiled sympathetically, aware of David's discomfort in places like that. David went on to describe the meeting. "I knew it was wrong when I got there. Really I knew it yesterday morning, when the vibe between us seemed to change from professional to personal. I should have talked to you then. I should have canceled. I went because...because..." He stared helplessly at Ben.

"Because you're scared of us getting too close too fast? Because you're not used to what's happening between us? Because your MO all your adult life has been to run before the other guy does so you won't be left alone again?"

"Yes," David whispered, a tear rolling down one cheek. "Yes."

* * * * *

David woke sometime near dawn. Carefully so as not to disturb Ben, he disentangled himself from Ben's arms and slid from the bed, padding softly to the kitchen for a cold bottle of water.

Once Ben had said what David hadn't known how to articulate, the floodgates had opened. They'd talked long into the night about their relationship and where they each wanted it to go. David admitted he wasn't used to the level of intimacy they shared.

Ben had replied, "We aren't married, David. We don't even live together, not officially. I can't expect you never to look at another guy, never to think about what it would be like to be with him. I don't think this thing with Nigel is a random fluke. If it hadn't been him now, it would have been someone else later on."

When David began to protest Ben said, "Listen, David. I love you. But I also know you. I think we've been going too fast. Your natural instinct is to run when things get too intense. I want us to be able to talk, even when we're scared—especially when we're scared.

"While you were out tonight, I did a lot of thinking. Maybe what we need is a few days apart? Some space to sort through our feelings. What do you think?"

"You don't want to be with me?" David had asked, confused.

"I do, more than anything. But I want it to be on terms we're both comfortable with. I remember what it felt like when Carl used to crowd me. It was like he was using up

my oxygen. I couldn't breathe around him sometimes. I never want to do that to you, David. If you want to see other guys, if that's what you need right now, I'll wait for you."

David had stared at his lover, wondering if he had inside him the capacity to commit to a long-term loving relationship. What if he couldn't do it? What if something had broken inside him the night of James' death – something that couldn't be healed, no matter how much love and patience Ben was willing to lavish on him?

Aloud he had said, "How long are you willing to wait?"

"As long as it takes. I'd wait a thousand years for you, David."

Now David slipped back between the covers, turning to snuggle against Ben, who was sleeping on his side, his back toward David. They hadn't made love before going to sleep, both too emotionally exhausted from their long, intense conversation. David hadn't been sure how he felt about Ben's proposal they take a few days off, but he had promised to sleep on it.

As he pressed up against Ben's warm, strong body, his cock stirred and hardened. He put his arm over Ben, rubbing his hand over Ben's strong, sexy chest. Still asleep, Ben turned, rolling onto his back. David reached down in search of his cock. It rose quickly to his touch, though Ben's breathing remained deep and even, his eyes closed.

Slipping down beneath the sheets, he sought out Ben's thick, long shaft, lowering his mouth over it as he fondled the warm, delicate sac beneath. As Ben's cock hardened to steel, he felt him come awake. Ben moaned softly, reaching down to stroke David's head as it bobbed over his shaft.

David felt overwhelmed, not only with sexual desire but with love. As he kissed and stroked his lover, he felt desire ricocheting through his body. His cock tingled with need he ignored. He wanted only to please Ben tonight, to make him crazy with lust and to satisfy that lust with all the skill he possessed.

He teased, kissed, suckled and stroked Ben's cock and balls, sliding down to lick at the puckered entrance and back up again, making Ben shudder and gasp. With long, sure strokes, he licked Ben's cock from base to head before taking it again deep into his throat. Ben began to writhe and thrust against him, gripping his hair as he panted with pleasure. "Oh, oh, ooooo..." Ben held the last syllable as his body arched out of control. David tasted his sweet cream as it shot into his mouth. He held him tight as Ben shuddered against him. Only when he stilled completely did David release him. Eagerly he licked the last drops as he let Ben slip from his lips.

"I want to do that...for you..." Ben said breathlessly. He tried to sit up but David pushed him back down. Tonight was for Ben, only for Ben. It was his small way of trying to make up for what he'd done – or nearly done – with Nigel. And his thanks for Ben's understanding and compassion.

"No," he answered softly. "This is just a dream. Lie down and sleep...sleep..." Ben obeyed, falling back to the pillows. David pulled himself up next to him, his cock still hard as he snuggled again against his lover. He stroked the hair from Ben's face,

tucking a dark golden tendril behind his ear before leaning over to lightly kiss his cheek. He could see in the light from the streetlamps through the window Ben's sleepy smile on his face, like a baby with a belly full of milk. He smiled back in spite of himself, pleased he'd been the one to put that smile there.

"I love you, Ben," he whispered, but Ben didn't hear him as sleep had claimed him once more.

Chapter Twelve

Friday afternoon the phone rang in David's apartment just as he was returning from a rehearsal. "Hello?"

"David?"

"Kevin?"

"Yeah, man! How are you?"

David hadn't talked to Kevin Foreman since he'd moved to California to make his movie star ambitions a reality. Their romance had been hot and heavy, burning very brightly for a few months before spluttering to a close. When he'd left, they'd both maintained the fiction they were still in love, only parting to follow their separate dreams. David, at least, had known better.

Yet now when he heard Kevin's sexy, gravelly voice on the other end of the line, his body responded before his mind could stop him, his cock hardening with the memory of the hot sex that in the end had been all they had left. "I'm doing great. How about you?" he said, genuinely interested. "Will I be seeing you on the big screen soon?"

"I wish. Man, it's tough out in L.A. It's a whole different scene from New York. I landed a couple of commercials and I'm reading for a new soap opera, but the competition's fierce. I miss New York, especially the Village. I miss you, David."

"I miss you too, Kevin," David replied, surprised to find he meant it. "When you're back in the city, we should get together."

"Well, guess what? I am back in the city! That's why I called. You're the very first person I called, in fact. Mom is next."

David was taken aback. "You're in New York? Now?"

"Yeah. I flew in late last night."

"You're moving back?"

"No, just here for a visit. My cousin's getting married and my mom sprang for the ticket. I'm just here for a few days. Tonight is my only free night. I was hoping maybe we could get together for the evening."

It had been three days since Ben and he had decided to spend a few days apart to think things through. Instead of crashing at Ben's after rehearsals or photo shoots, he'd gone back to his own apartment in Queens. They'd talked on the phone several times a day, lingering conversations, neither of them wanting to say goodbye.

David had mixed feelings about the arrangement. Though he had been relieved in a way to step back, from the moment they'd agreed to take a breather, he'd begun to miss Ben. It felt strange to go back to Queens to sleep alone. Nigel had actually called once

more, asking if he'd like to meet again if he thought he'd be "better company" this time, but David had declined.

He really tried to use their time apart to put things in perspective. He knew this relationship was different. Ben was not just the latest in a series of men he would fall into and then out of love with. David realized though their sex life was terrific and satisfying, it wasn't the key to what was special between them. Ben was the first man to create a safe place for David. A place where he could finally be himself, flaws and all.

Though it had only been a few days, he missed Ben with a palpable ache, especially in the middle of the night, when he reached out sleepily to hold his lover. Yet when they spoke on the phone, he had yet to say, "I want to see you." He knew Ben wasn't going to say it first. He had been clear he wanted to give David some time to think things through on his own.

To Kevin he said, "Where are you staying?"

"I'm at my sister's in Brooklyn. I'd like to come by, if that's all right. You still living in that studio apartment in Jamaica?"

"I am. I haven't exactly made the big time either," David laughed. "Though I've been getting some good roles lately."

"You'll have to tell me all about it. I have tonight free. Just say when you'd like to see me and I shall appear on your doorstep, bearing pizza and a six-pack. You can watch me drink."

David gave a small laugh, recalling suddenly how it used to annoy Kevin when he wouldn't drink with him. He said drinking alone made him feel like an alcoholic. David used to think drinking the entire six-pack in one sitting might be more cause to think that rather than drinking alone, but he'd kept his counsel.

"Why don't you let me pick up the pizza? Remember Vinny's?"

"Sure I do. Best crust outside of Brooklyn. So then, I'll bring my beer and see you, what, about seven?"

"It's a date."

* * * * *

Ben leaned back in his office chair and put his hands behind his head. He'd been staying late at the office every night this week, not wanting to go home to his empty place. He hadn't seen David since he'd left him sleeping in his bed early Wednesday morning, and though he pretended to be cool on the phone, in fact he missed him horribly.

It took all his self-control during each phone conversation not to beg David to come home. Yet he knew in his heart the only way things could work between them was if David came to him on his own—without duress or pressure. He had meant it when he said he'd wait a thousand years, but each passing day without David felt like a lifetime.

At night he slept on what had become his side of the bed in the few months they'd been together. In his sleep he would reach out for David and awaken with a jolt, wondering where he was. Then he would remember.

Ben left the office and returned home to the apartment he knew would be empty. He grabbed the mail and headed up, wondering where David was at that moment. He kept imagining David and Nigel getting together again, this time doing more than sharing a drink at a trendy bar.

Ben considered calling Randy or Harris, both gay friends who had been more than friends from time to time, though never in a serious way. Why not? It would distract him from the recurring fantasy of David and Nigel naked in David's loft, wrapped in each other's arms, whispering each other's names while they made love until the sun rose... He shook his head and flicked open his cell phone, scrolling through the address book until he came upon the name, Randy Williams. He pressed the button, but before the call connected, he closed the phone, ending the call.

Who was he kidding? He didn't want to see Randy or Harris or anyone but David! He picked up his briefcase, removing a much-handled photograph and gazing at it with a smile. He had taken the photo of David sitting on a bench in Central Park. They'd spent the day roaming the city, David with his beloved traditional film camera around his neck. When Ben had asked why he didn't have a digital camera, David had looked scandalized. He'd begun rambling about formats and spatial resolution and other esoteric things Ben didn't understand but took David's word for, based on the amazing shots he managed to come up with.

David must have snapped a hundred pictures that day, popping in a new roll of film every so often from his backpack. Most of them were of Ben, which had made him self-conscious. David had laughed and said, "Okay, you take one of me then."

The result he now held in his hand. David had set it up for him, adjusting for lighting and shutter speed. He'd handed the camera to Ben and sat back on the bench, resting his arms over the back of it, relaxed before the camera, his strong, sexy legs bare. He was wearing white shorts that day with a dark blue shirt that caught the dazzling blue color of his eyes and deepened them. He was looking directly into the camera, his lips parted in a soft smile. It seemed to Ben, David himself was staring right at him, somehow connected through space and time by this image. The sun had been setting behind him, glimmering red in his burnished brown hair, a tendril of which had flopped over one eye. Feeling a little silly, but unable to help himself, Ben lifted the picture to his lips and lightly kissed it.

David developed his own film, using the darkroom of a friend of his who was a professional photographer. He'd promised Ben to take him one time soon to observe the process. Ben had fallen in love with the picture when David showed it to him. He knew it had come out so well because of David's skill, in spite of Ben's amateur ability with a camera. He had asked at once if he could have the photo. "But you've got me here in the flesh every day," David had laughed...

Ben sighed. He was being ridiculous. They'd only been apart for three days. It wasn't as if they'd broken up. They were just taking a breather. Surely David would call soon to say, "Ben, I have to see you!" Wouldn't he?

* * * * *

"Kevin! It's good to see you." They embraced at the door. David stepped back to welcome his ex-lover. Kevin was nearly a head shorter than David with tawny red-gold hair and striking green eyes. He was wearing a lime green T-shirt that bore the logo *I do all my own stunts*. He lifted the small tote bag he was carrying and removed a six pack of beer with a flourish.

David said, "Pizza's on its way. Meat Lover's Delight, your favorite."

"You remembered, how sweet," Kevin said, adding with a comical leer, "I always loved *your* meat best." David shook his head and groaned.

The doorbell rang, signaling the arrival of their dinner. Once the well-tipped pizza deliveryman was on his way, they settled down at David's fold-out kitchen table. They caught up on each other's lives, mainly talking about their acting careers, between slices of pizza. Neither brought up his love life.

New York summer was in full force that day, the sticky, humid air barely cooling as night fell. After their meal, they moved to the couch to sit in the pocket of cool air created by the single wheezing air conditioner unit David had in the living room window. "I sure don't miss the summers here!" Kevin exclaimed. "I do miss you though, David. Remember the crazy stuff we used to do?"

David thought back to their wild sex. Kevin had been the more adventurous of the two, encouraging David to have sex in the changing room at a department store or at the beach behind the sand dunes. He recalled now how Kevin used to love to wrestle, his small, wiry body deceptively strong, though he always ending up the loser, pinned down beneath David, who had size and strength on his side.

"Are you seeing someone?" Kevin asked softly, turning his liquid green gaze on David.

"Yes." It felt good to say it—a kind of declaration.

"Tell me about him."

"His name is Ben. Ben Richman." Saying his name made David smile.

"You're in love, huh?"

David's smile broadened. "Am I that obvious?"

"You couldn't be more obvious if you'd written it across your forehead in red ink," Kevin laughed. David grinned in response, but sobered as Kevin asked, "So where is he?"

"We're, uh, taking a few days off." As Kevin cocked a quizzical eyebrow he added, "We needed to think things through. We were getting too intense, maybe. We needed some space, I guess."

"You don't sound happy about that. I'm guessing he's the one who needed the space?"

"No actually. Well, yes. I mean, he's the one who suggested it. But it was because of me..." David's voice trailed away. Ben's words drifted into his mind... *It's because I love you so much I think we should do this. I want to wait until you're ready.*

"Because of you?" Kevin echoed.

"Yes. We've only been together three months. It was getting really intense. You know, pretty much living together, though we've kept our separate places. Not dating anyone else, getting really close. I was, I don't know, feeling a little hemmed in maybe. Too much too fast. I sort of almost got involved with someone else. Ben saw an email. I was going to tell him..."

"Oh ho," Kevin laughed. "You should know better than that. Emails can fuck you up, David. Never leave the evidence!"

David frowned. "It wasn't evidence of a love affair or anything! I just agreed to meet the guy for a drink, but I kind of told Ben it was for business. The guy had interviewed me for *The Scene*."

"*The Scene*!" Kevin exclaimed, clearly impressed. "You're doing better than you're letting on, eh?"

David smiled. "I don't know about that. I got a couple of good breaks. But anyway, things kind of came to a head earlier this week and we agreed to take a breather."

"And now you miss him like crazy."

"Yeah," David admitted sadly. He shook his head, forcing a smile. "What about you? You seeing anyone seriously?"

"No. Not seriously. I'm having too much fun. I have a new guy lined up for each night of the week. I enjoy the variety. I may not be in love but, baby, I'm never lonely." He laughed. "Frankly, I don't need the complication of love. It's too much work."

David nodded. It was work, but didn't the things most worth having take work? Until he'd met Ben, he'd pretty much shared Kevin's happy-go-lucky philosophy, playing the field and keeping his feelings intact. Unlike Kevin's assertion however, he had in fact been very lonely at the core of it, though he hadn't realized it.

The secrets he'd never been able to share about James, his family's rejection of him and the way those events had shaped his life, had leached into his heart, silently, dangerously preventing him truly giving of himself. Until Ben had found a way with his gentle, loving approach, to give David the courage to finally shine light on his buried secret, he'd quietly despaired of ever being able to truly connect to another person on anything but a superficial level.

Sharing his secrets had taken the sting from them, had denied them the power to hold him back from fully living his life, and it was thanks to Ben. God, he missed Ben! What was he doing sitting here with someone he no longer knew, when he could be holding Ben in his arms, kissing him between whispers?

"You seem to be lost in a daydream, my friend," Kevin said, startling David, who had almost forgotten he was there. Kevin had moved closer to him, his thigh touching David's. "I think about you a lot," he said softly, trailing his finger down David's bare leg. Despite himself, David felt his body responding. The finger left a trail of heat, a promise of more. He looked into Kevin's face.

"You know I'm involved," he said, suddenly wanting to kiss Kevin's mouth.

"Yes. I'm not really here. Just a memory...a fantasy. Think of me that way. I'll be gone in the morning. What harm is there in a little stolen pleasure?" Kevin reached out to stroke David's cheek, his finger trailing another line of fire down his neck to his chest. David, dressed in a thin cotton T-shirt and shorts, knew he should pull away when Kevin slipped his hand into the shirt, pressing his palm against David's chest.

"I love how strong you always were," he murmured, massaging David's pectoral muscle with hot fingers. He leaned forward, closing his eyes for a kiss.

Just a memory...a fantasy... How easy to pretend, to push away the loneliness of being apart from Ben by letting Kevin make love to him. He closed his eyes as well, letting his lips touch Kevin's, feeling the probe of his tongue sliding past his teeth.

It was a kiss at once foreign and familiar, the ex-lover now supplanted by the current lover, by Ben. As he permitted Kevin to explore his mouth, his mind turned to Ben, to Ben's ardent kiss, to his own passionate response. As Kevin's hand roamed his body, dropping lower to pull at his zipper, David thought of Ben's hands, large and elegant as they drove David into a frenzy of pleasure along with his mouth and his body...

He was barely aware as Kevin slipped to the floor in front of him, reaching eagerly into his underwear, his breath hot against David's thigh. He looked down, realizing what was happening. "No, Kevin. No." He pushed against Kevin's shoulder.

Kevin laughed. "Don't be a tease. Come on, baby. For old time's sake. You know you want it."

David gazed down at him. He couldn't deny his erection, but the man he hungered for was in SoHo, not here. "No," he said again, standing. "I'm sorry, Kevin." He zipped his shorts and held out his hand to pull Kevin to his feet.

"You're serious, aren't you?" Kevin said, his expression incredulous. He shook his head. "Man, you got it bad, babe. I hope I never get the point where I refuse a blowjob!"

David sat in the middle of his living room floor with photographs scattered all around him. Kevin had left shortly after David's gentle but firm rebuff. They'd parted amiably enough. "Let's stay in touch," Kevin had said, but David doubted they would. He wasn't sorry he'd seen his ex-lover again. He wasn't even sorry Kevin made that pass at him. It had helped to clarify once and for all what David wanted in his life.

The night air finally cooled to a tolerable degree. David sat cross-legged, picking up first one photo then another. Here was Ben in his favorite reading chair, absorbed in a book, unaware David was about to snap the picture. There was Ben asleep on his bed,

the sheet barely covering his ass as he lay on his belly, a study in masculine perfection. Here were the series of park shots, Ben walking along the river, Ben gazing at the sky, Ben laughing at something David had just said.

He picked up the two photos a stranger had snapped for them. The first one he examined was actually the second one the young woman had taken—when they were posing for the camera. Both of them were looking head-on. Ben, not used to the camera as David was, had a stiff sort of smile on his face. David dropped the picture and picked up the second one.

This was one of David's favorite pictures. He hadn't shown it to Ben, afraid what was revealed there might embarrass him. The woman had snapped the picture before they were ready. David was looking slightly to the left of the camera, a slight smile on his face. But Ben was looking at David with an expression of such open, naked love it almost made David blush to look at it. It also made him feel warm inside—safe somehow. If there was a person out there whose love for him was so clear it could be captured randomly by a stranger, he was a lucky man indeed.

"Why am I here, when he is there?" he asked aloud.

* * * * *

Two short raps, one long. *David?* Ben sat up expectantly, holding his breath. He hadn't been asleep, though it was after midnight. He'd been reading the same page of his book for a while, his mind wandering as he wondered what David was doing and if he were already asleep, and if he were sleeping alone...

He heard the key turning in the door and called out, "David!" as he scrambled from the bed in only his underwear, not even taking the time to put on pants. He ran out into the living room. The door opened and there stood David, looking ruffled and tired, his hair a dark tumble over his forehead. He was carrying his duffel bag, which he dropped to the floor as he stood staring at Ben. "I'm sorry it's so late. I should have called but I didn't want to wake you."

"I wasn't asleep. I was just reading."

They stood staring at one another for several seconds. Ben tried to read David's face. As David stared at him, his eyes filled with tears, his smile tentative. Was he coming to say goodbye? Ben tried to hold on as he felt the world tilt toward this moment, which he knew would define the rest of his life.

He nearly staggered with relief as David opened his arms, moving forward to grab Ben in a tight bear hug. They held on for several moments, slowly sinking in concert to their knees. David began to kiss Ben, tiny kisses covering his cheeks, his eyes, his lips, the tip of his nose, his forehead.

Gently he took David's face in his hands, forcing him to stop the nearly frantic kisses. "Hey," he said, "Hey, it's okay. I'm not going anywhere." They stared at one another before leaning forward as one, eyes closing, lips parting. Ben felt the tension that had been coiled like a snake inside him the last few days begin to ease.

The kiss was sweet and warm. Ben reveled in the taste and touch of his lover, in the feel and smell of his skin. When at last they pulled apart, David dropped his head to Ben's shoulder and whispered, "I couldn't last another second. I don't want space, Ben. I want you."

Ben felt happiness bubbling up through him. "I was willing to wait a thousand years. Are you telling me I only had to wait three days?"

"What can I say," David laughed. "It seemed like a thousand years to me."

The passion began to rise between them. Soon they were both panting, their connection nearly desperate as they bit, kissed and suckled at one another's mouth. David pushed Ben back on the throw rug on which they knelt, trailing his lips down Ben's throat to his bare chest. As he licked Ben's nipples, David's hand slipped past the elastic of his underwear. Ben's cock hardened and lengthened in David's warm grasp. David began to move down, his intention clear.

Ben pulled him up by the shoulders, drawing him back into an embrace. "Not yet. Let me hold you." He wrapped his arms again around David, joy singing in his veins just to be near him again.

"Ben," David said, as they held one another. "The time apart was good for me." Ben held his breath. "It made things so much clearer for me. I realize now it wasn't you who was crowding me. It was my own demons. With your help, I've been able to let them go or at least come to some kind of peace with them. You've helped me get to a place I didn't think I could ever get to. For the first time in my life, I'm really in love. Yeah, it's still scary sometimes, but if you're with me, I know I'll be fine. I want to live with you. I want to grow old with you. You're who I want, if you still want me."

Ben didn't answer with words, but his kiss left no doubt.

* * * * *

Ben stood in the elevator, watching the numbers flick by as it rose to his floor. Peter Jenkins, an acquaintance who worked in Carl's firm, stood next to him. Turning to Ben, he said, "Hey, you're friends with Carl Young, right?"

Ben was immediately on his guard. "I know him," he said cautiously. When they'd been together they'd been very discreet at work, or so he'd thought.

"Is he sick or something? He hasn't come in all week and nobody's heard from him. I was just wondering if maybe you knew where he was."

Ben shook his head. "No. I haven't seen him in a while." Peter nodded and they both stared again at the numbers flashing overhead.

* * * * *

David and Ben were both shirtless on that hot summer afternoon, sitting in David's studio apartment sipping lemonade. "Someone from Carl's firm stopped me on the elevator yesterday," Ben said, suddenly recalling the episode. "Asked me if I knew

where he was. Said they hadn't seen him at work for a week but he'd never called out sick."

"Huh," David answered. "Maybe we'll get lucky and never hear from him again either." He leaned over to kiss Ben, not wanting to be distracted by anything to do with Carl. After a moment he pulled back and said, "Hey, I have an idea. The light's really good right now. How about I'll add another picture to my Blue Recliner series? I could take some shots of you in the chair. Hang your picture alongside the others."

"Hey, I thought you said they weren't lovers! Strictly professional."

"They weren't! But it's my series. I get to make the rules. If I want my lover in it, you can be in it. You're certainly as good-looking as any of those guys."

Ben shook his head. "I am not!" he retorted, touching the bump on his crooked nose with a rueful grin. He set down his empty lemonade glass and grinned. "What the hell. If you want to try it, I'm game. We can always destroy the negatives." He stood from the couch, unzipping and stepping out of his shorts and underwear.

David admired his naked form, his own hardening cock almost distracting him from the task at hand. He couldn't get enough of Ben, no matter how many times they'd made love. He hoped it would always be this way. Ben walked over to the recliner and sat down on it, waiting. Forcing himself to focus, David retrieved his camera and said, "Let's do a reclining pose. Lean back. Yes, that's good. Raise your right knee and turn your head this way."

When he was satisfied with Ben's position, he stepped back, snapping a few shots before stopping to adjust the lens. "Don't look at me. Look out the window. Think of something sexy."

"That's easy," Ben answered, smiling at David.

They were distracted by a sound at David's door. Someone was pounding on it. "Let me in! Open the door, you son of a bitch!" Before either could react, Carl smashed his body against the unlocked door, nearly falling as he crashed into the room.

"What the hell!" Ben cried out, jumping up from the chair.

David whirled toward Carl. "You have two seconds to get out of my house." Keeping his eyes on Carl, he said, "Ben, call 911."

Carl stared from one to the other. His eyes were wild. His hair was greasy, falling unkempt around his gray face, which was covered with several days' worth of beard. "You filthy slut!" he screamed at Ben. "Standing there naked in this murderer's den! I wouldn't take you back if you got on your knees and begged, you whore! You bastard!" With surprising speed and agility, Carl lunged not toward Ben but toward David, catching him by surprise. He managed to get David in a chokehold, gripping him tightly from behind. David felt something cold and sharp against his throat.

"Carl! What the hell do you think you're doing! Put that down." Ben, indifferent to his own nudity, took a step toward the two men, incredulity on his face.

"Come one step closer and I'll cut the bastard's throat. He did this to us! He tore us apart! If he hadn't stuck his cock where it didn't belong, you'd be home with me right now." Carl's voice cracked. David was assailed with the nearly overpowering smell of whiskey and stale sweat. Carl's grip was powerful around his neck, the knife held just above his thickly muscled arms. David thought if he could swing forward and flip him, it might take him enough by surprise to work. *Call 911*, he mouthed, but Ben didn't move, no doubt afraid Carl would act on his threat if he did.

"Carl, please," Ben began. David could see the fear on his face. His own heart was racing, adrenaline pumping, rage held in check only by the blade at his jugular. Speaking in a calm voice that belied the fear David knew he must feel, Ben said, "Come on, Carl. You're not thinking straight. You need to let go. You need to get past this. It isn't about David."

He held up his hands, trying to reason with a madman. "Put down the knife. Let David go, Carl. This is between you and me. I'll get dressed and we'll go somewhere and talk. Okay? Put down the knife and let him go. Do it, Carl."

For a moment Carl's grip relaxed slightly. "He's a murderer, Ben." His voice came out as a whine but hardened as he continued. "He's a liar and a thief. He stole you from me! He stole the love of my life. I can't let him get away with it. Not even for you."

David tensed, ready to break his hold. At that moment Ben took a step closer and Carl pressed the point of the knife against David's neck. He felt its sharp prick a moment before he felt something wet sliding down into his shirt. He realized it was his own blood. The man was drunk, possibly murderously drunk.

Ben froze in his tracks, his face a mask of horror. "No! Carl, no!" Before David realized what was happening, Ben dropped to the ground in a crouch, hurtling toward them. He tackled both men, knocking them to the ground. As David fell back onto Carl, the knife skidded from his hand, sliding across the floor.

For a moment it was a free-for-all of arms, legs and bodies, twisting, wrestling, gripping. Ben pushed David aside with superhuman force, tackling Carl. It wasn't long before he had Carl facedown on the ground, his right arm ratcheted up hard and high against his back, his body pinned beneath him.

David pulled himself to a standing position, dazed and out of breath. Ben was breathing hard. "David! He hurt you. You're bleeding like crazy." David looked down at his shirt, blooms of red spreading over it. He touched the spot where Carl had cut him and looked at his fingers, streaked with bright red.

He felt dizzy but knew he wasn't really hurt. "It's not deep. He just nicked me. I'm okay. I'm calling the police." Pressing the cut with his fingers, David hurried toward the phone hung on the kitchen wall.

Pressing a dishtowel against the wound David said, "We have an intruder. He tried to kill me. He's drunk and he's crazy. His name is Carl Young." He answered some questions, eager to hang up and get back to Ben's side.

Ben continued to straddle Carl, who lay limp and lifeless beneath him. David was about to suggest he take a turn holding Carl down so Ben could get up and get dressed before the police arrived.

All at once Carl seemed to come alive. With a sudden savage jerk, he twisted himself from beneath Ben, who fell away from him with a startled yelp. With speed born of desperation, Carl hurtled toward the still-open door. Before they could stop him, he thundered down the stairs. David arrived at the door in time to see him loping toward to his car. He leaped in, burning his tires in a squeal as he disappeared.

"Get dressed," David called out to Ben. "The police will get the bastard. We know where he lives."

When the police arrived about two minutes after Carl had taken off, they took Ben's and David's statements, suggested they file a restraining order and promised to pay a visit to the alleged offender. They agreed David's wound was superficial, but took pictures as evidence in the event an assault arrest was made. David changed his blood-soaked T-shirt and allowed Ben to bandage his wound.

"I'm so sorry. So, so sorry," Ben kept repeating as he cleaned and dressed the cut with a thick gauze bandage.

David took Ben by the shoulders and stared into his eyes. "Listen. Stop. This isn't your fault. The man was drunk off his ass. He's crazy. He's going to be arrested for this. We'll press charges. He's gone way over the line this time. We're not going to stand around to find out what he's going to next."

Deeply shaken, David and Ben decided to head over to Ben's place after carefully locking David's apartment. They held hands the whole way on the subway, indifferent to the occasional pointed stare of other passengers.

Ben's cell phone rang just as they entered his apartment. "Ben Richman."

"Mr. Richman? This is Sergeant Goff with the NYPD. I'm calling about Carl Young."

The officers who had come to take their statements were named Sanders and Wilson. Ben was confused. "What about him?"

"We have some bad news. You were listed in Mr. Young's wallet as the person to call in case of emergency. He's been involved in a serious auto accident. He sustained a fractured sternum and a broken leg. Once he's stabilized, we'll be moving him from the hospital to a prison facility. He's been placed under arrest. His car spun out of control and hit another car head-on. The driver of that vehicle is also in the hospital. Mr. Young's blood alcohol level was dangerously high at the time of the accident. If she doesn't pull through, he could be charged with vehicular manslaughter or even homicide."

The stark irony of the situation stunned Ben into silence as he stared at the phone. He glanced at David. "Mr. Richman? Are you there?" the voice on the phone asked.

"Yes. Yes, I'm here. Thank you for letting me know."

* * * * *

"This was such a good idea." Ben and David sat side by side on low beach chairs, digging their toes in the warm, wet sand as the waves crashed and rolled to the shore in front of them. Ben took a deep breath of the fresh sea air, lifting his face toward the sun.

"I'm glad we could get away. It's been a rough couple of weeks." David smiled back at his lover. They were staying at a bed-and-breakfast at Bethany Beach for a long weekend, far enough from the city to really feel as if they were getting away, but not so far they couldn't drive.

Carl had pulled through fine, but the woman he'd hit had not. In addition to the breaking and entering and assault charges he faced as a result of attacking David, he had been charged with vehicular homicide and was out on bail awaiting trial. He'd hired an excellent attorney but the evidence against him was too overwhelming to do much more than get it reduced to vehicular manslaughter. When it came to trial, Carl was definitely facing jail time. His career in investment banking would be ruined.

Though both men had come to despise Carl, neither was happy with what had happened. An innocent woman had lost her life. The event had naturally triggered negative feelings for David, dredging up his own experience, though admittedly the situation had been quite different. Carl had called Ben several times from the hospital, begging him for help and forgiveness, still deluded into thinking there was something left between them. Ben had told him it wasn't for him to forgive. After a while he stopped taking the calls.

Ben reached over, touching the still-healing red scar on David's neck. Eventually it would fade to white or possibly disappear altogether. Gently David put his hand over Ben's, pulling it toward his mouth. He kissed Ben's palm and smiled at him. "Let's focus just on us this weekend, okay?"

Ben looked up at him and gave a small smile. He shook his head, as if shaking unwanted thoughts from his brain. "It's a deal."

"Let's take a swim before dinner. Want to?" Ben nodded and they both stood, weaving between children building sand castles and young women slathered in oil, roasting in the sun. They stood together ankle-deep in the cool water, feeling the pull of the tide at their feet as the wave slid away. They waded in deeper, standing still as a large wave curled its way toward them.

Each stood poised, ready to leap into its foamy spray. As the wave crested in front of them, the two men dived together as one, letting the sea enfold them in its sensuous embrace.

About the Author

Claire Thompson has written numerous novels and short stories, all exploring aspects of Dominance & submission. Ms. Thompson's gentler novels seek not only to tell a story, but to come to grips with, and ultimately exalt in the true beauty and spirituality of a loving exchange of power. Her darker works press the envelope of what is erotic and what can be a sometimes dangerous slide into the world of sadomasochism. She writes about the timeless themes of sexuality and romance, with twists and curves to examine the 'darker' side of the human psyche. Ultimately Claire's work deals with the human condition, and our constant search for love and intensity of experience.

Claire welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her author bio page at www.ellorascave.com.

Tell Us What You Think

We appreciate hearing reader opinions about our books. You can email us at Comments@EllorasCave.com.

Also by Claire Thompson

A Lover's Call

Bird In a Cage – *with J.W. McKenna*

Cast a Lover's Spell

Closely Held Secrets

Club de Sade

Continuum of Longing

Crimson Ties

Dare To Dominate

Face of Submission

Golden Boy

Golden Man

Island of Temptation

Jewel Thief

Masked Submission

Outcast

Pleasure Planet *anthology*

Sacred Blood

Sacred Circle

Secret Diaries

The Seduction of Colette

Slave Castle

Slave Gamble

Turning Tricks



Discover for yourself why readers can't get enough of the multiple award-winning publisher Ellora's Cave. Whether you prefer e-books or paperbacks, be sure to visit EC on the web at www.ellorascave.com for an erotic reading experience that will leave you breathless.

www.ellorascave.com